

So, how about we
give dating a try?

You Like Me, Don't You?

2



Author
Kota Nozomi
Illustrator
Azuri Hyuga





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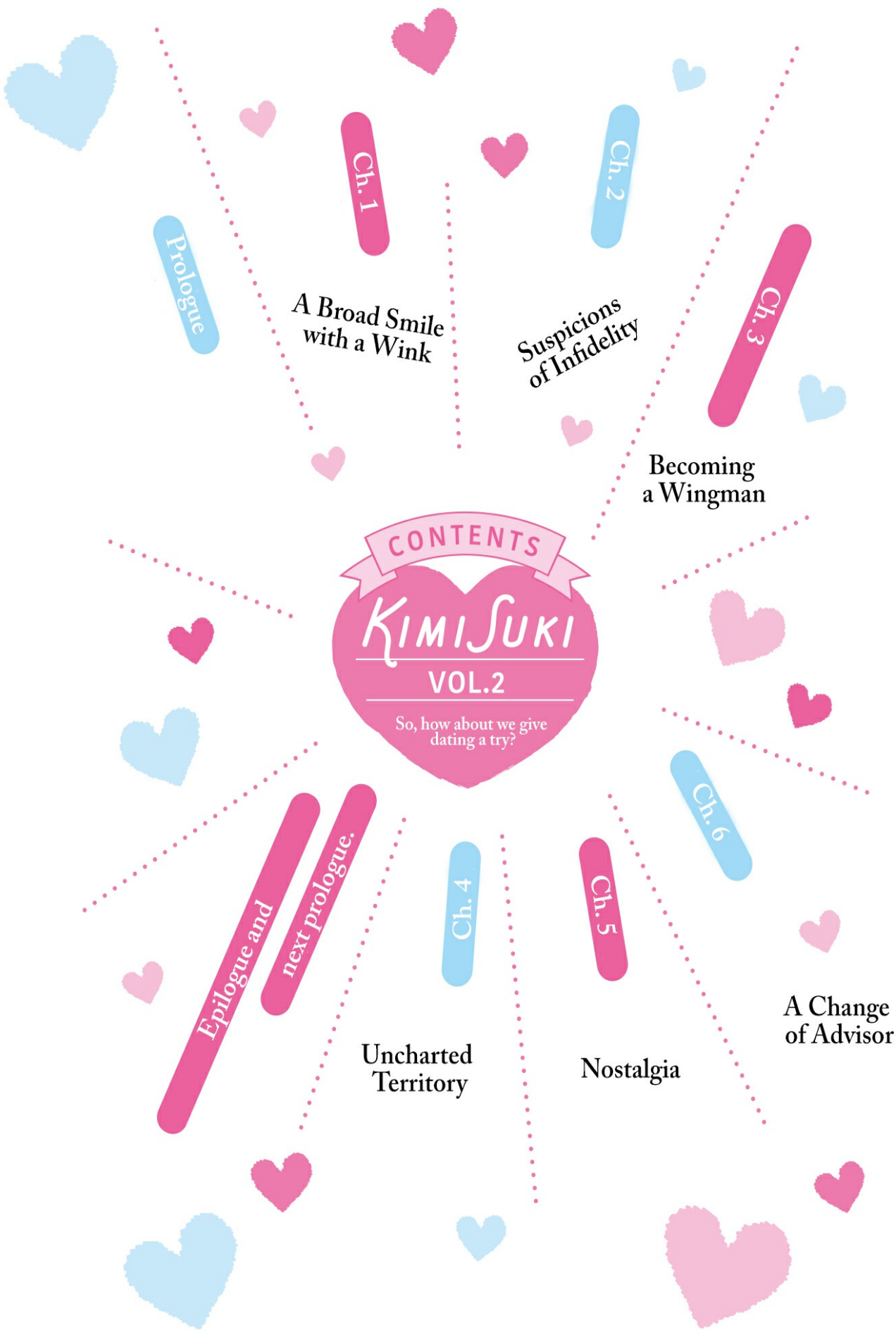
Hey...

Whoaaa! So soft!

Aren't you going to
tease me back?

An anime-style illustration of two young women sitting closely together on a red, modern-looking bench. The woman on the right has long, straight black hair and bright blue eyes. She is wearing a light blue short-sleeved top and a dark blue skirt, and she holds a white rectangular handbag. She has a heart-shaped pendant on a chain around her neck and a small bracelet on her left wrist. She is looking towards the viewer with a slight smile. The woman on the left has shorter black hair and is looking down with a slightly blushing expression. She is wearing a similar light blue top and dark skirt, with a black bag slung over her shoulder. The background is a soft-focus view of a city street with buildings and a clear sky.

We're already going out, so
we don't really need an excuse
to snuggle like this in public,
right?



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Prologue

Ever since she was little, adults would always refer to her as being “mature.” In fact, everyone did, whether it be the friends she made at school, her teachers, or even the old ladies across the street. It even extended as far as her own father.

As for why she received that label, part of it was certainly due to her body growing at a faster rate than her peers, but the most likely reason was her personality and how she carried herself, though her general appearance might have also been a factor.

She simply didn’t feel anything at all about it. Kasumi Shiramori herself was also convinced of her advanced maturity. It wasn’t a label she flaunted about to others; she simply believed herself to be so objectively. That being said, she didn’t exactly enjoy being referred to in that way. She understood that whenever adults called her mature, it was intended as a compliment, but she neither felt happy about it, nor felt any particular distaste about it. Her feelings regarding the label could more aptly be described as “indifferent.”

After all, when an adult labels you as mature, what they’re really saying is that they don’t need to spend much time or effort taking care of you. It means that you dutifully listen to what your parents and teachers tell you.

You’re obedient and are easily taught.

You don’t act like a spoiled child whenever you don’t get your way.

You don’t engage in any horseplay or cause any scene.

You don’t go up to your parents and beg them to play with you or take you somewhere fun when they’re busy, and if everybody is away, you idle the day away quietly reading a book or keeping up with your studies.

All of those descriptions perfectly encapsulate what adults consider to be “mature.”

Based on that definition, Kasumi Shiramori was certainly a shining example of a mature youth, because that was exactly how she’d lived her up until now, the only lifestyle she was afforded to live. She’d never been demanded to behave in

such a fashion, but she felt an inherent pressure from her surroundings to live up to her label.

And so she decided to abide by what people tacitly expected of her. She never truly wanted to do so, yet she still wanted to meet everyone's expectations. She wished to become a mature child, to act as if already an adult. Because if she did, then perhaps one day—

Chapter One

A Broad Smile with a Wink

At Midoriba High, there were four exceptionally gorgeous girls known as The Four Heavenly Beauties. They all just so happened to be friends with one another, and whenever they were seen together, people couldn't help but have their eyes drawn toward their unparalleled beauty.

According to what others had told Soukichi, all four of them somehow ended up in the same class during their first year. That was also around the time when their fellow students began referring to them by that unbelievably moronic moniker.

This esteemed group were now in their third and final year, with each of them now separated into different classes. As a result, it had gotten increasingly rare to see all of them together at the same time. That isn't to say that the girls fell out with each other or ended up drifting apart with time. Simply put, socialites like them, who already have a large friend group as is, did not feel as inclined to take time out of their day to visit another classroom. All they had to do was wait for others to come to them; either that, or they could just as easily, effortlessly even, create a brand new social group within their own classroom. Those aforementioned reasons were why they don't need to try and force each other to constantly hang out together. Another possibility was that they were aware of the effect they have on others when among each other and want to avoid standing out as much as possible. While their impact had dulled in regards to the third-year students by now, the first-year and second-year students still viewed the "Four Heavenly Beauties" as these almost God-like figures that they rarely received the honor of seeing. Just one of them entering the cafeteria alone was enough to catch the attention of the juniors and sophomores. If three of them were to come together...



"Woah! Look over there!"

"Oh my God! It's one of the Four Heavenly Beauties!"

“It’s not just one! There’s three of them!”

Soukichi saw the ensuing uproar coming from a mile away. The fervor was likely originating from the first-years, who were rapturously celebrating their good fortune at having a chance to worship the legendary beauties. Having three of them show up all at once was likely only adding to their excitement.

The girls who walked through those cafeteria doors were Tanned Gal, Pigtales Lolita, and Cougar. The three of them, paying no attention to the gazes of envy that were aimed their way, nonchalantly headed in the direction of the ticket machine—No wait. Only two of them, Tanned Gal and Cougar, ignored the attention they were receiving. Pigtales Lolita, meanwhile, upon noticing the attention she was attracting from her underclassmen, flashed them an amiable smile.

“Woohoo! Hey, everyone! Peace sign! Peace sign!” she chirped as she began throwing out peace signs, a signature for those popular in the idol industry.

Pigtales Lolita, also known as Rino Sakon, was a girl of small stature and childish facial features far more befitting of someone who hadn’t even graduated middle school yet, let alone being in their final year of high school. Her amber hair, which was tied up to the sides, only further accentuated her childlike appearance. I’m not exactly the first to give any credence to the utter nonsensical nicknames people gave them, but in this case, I’d have to say Rino was truly befitting of her nickname.

“Hello, all my underclassmen! How are you all doing today? It’s me, Rino! I love each and every one of you!” Rino cooed.

“Cut it out already, dummy,” Tanned Gal, who was standing behind her, said irritably and gave Rino a light poke to her head, causing her overly perfect faux smile to crumble.

As her nickname implies, Tanned Gal, also known as Ann Ukyou, was a beauty with tanned skin that perfectly fit the “gal” stereotype. Her sharp stare and perfectly-done makeup added to the thorny impression she gave off. With an irritated look on her face, Ann stared down at Rino.

Rino, on the other hand, puffed her cheeks with a teary expression on her face.

“Owww! What did you do that for, Ann-Ann!” she whined.

“Obviously because you’re embarrassing us,” she responded with venom.

“What do you mean? I didn’t do anything like that! I was just showing off to our adorable underclassmen just how cute and adorable I am!”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about, dammit! My God, this is why I don’t like eating lunch with you.”

“You’re gonna lose all of your fans if you don’t stop being such a sourpuss, Ann-Ann! You do realize that you’re one of the ‘Four Heavenly Beauties,’ right? You have to, no, absolutely must live up to your position as a member of this school’s idol group!”

“You do know you’re the only one of us that actually likes that stupid nickname, yeah?” retorted Ann in an irritated tone.

Guess Rino is the sole flagbearer of that low-effort garbage of a nickname in the group.



“My my, your sense of danger is most lacking, Ann-Ann. There’s no telling when someone will show up and come after your spot in the Four Heavenly Beauties!”

“If literally anybody walked up to me and asked for this trash title, I’d give it up in a heartbeat.”

“...Are you really so sure about that? It won’t be long before “she” returns from her time abroad. You know, the fabled original fifth member who once led us with such overwhelming charisma and beauty—”

“Who the heck are you talking about?! Our group never had any “original members” to begin with!”

“Wahahaha! Bullseye! The truth is we’ve always been our little tight-knit group of four friends since we first debuted here!” Rino cackled in response to Ann’s comeback. It appears their group never actually had that fabled original fifth member.

Dammit, cursed Soukichi in his mind, *For a second there, you actually have me believing you there!* Having a group called the “Four Heavenly X.” followed by a huge reveal of a hidden “fifth member.” or a mysterious “Member Zero.” was an often used cliché, after all. Can you really blame someone for buying into it?

“Sigh... Hey, Kasumi. Back me up here already, please,” Ann said, an exhausted look on her face.

In response, the girl nicknamed “Cougar” replied, “Huh? Me? Hmm... Sure, yeah...”

Kasumi Shiramori, aka “Cougar.” was tall and had a nice figure with curves in all the right places. A third-year student like her fellow group members, she boasted a more mature side of beauty and could more aptly be described as a “beautiful woman” than a “beautiful girl.” In addition to her incredibly distasteful title of “Cougar.” she also possessed another title: the “Art and Literature Circle President.” That meant she belonged to the same circle where Soukichi happened to be the Vice President.

“Well, I’m with Ann on the point about not really liking that weird label people use when talking about us. However, I do understand where Rino is

coming from here,” Kasumi said while smiling placatingly. “Besides, isn’t it normal to want to reward the person who tells you they like you?”

A teasing look now spread across her face, Kasumi looked around the cafeteria. It wasn’t long before she found Soukichi sitting in one of the corners of the cafeteria.

“...!”

Soukichi, upon meeting eyes with Kasumi, felt his entire body stiffen. Kasumi, her smile exuding pure confidence, shot a playful wink at Soukichi. It was a simple action; nothing more than the closing of a single eyelid. Yet in spite of that, Soukichi felt himself quickly losing control of his emotions.

Hey, hold up! What the heck is that dang girl doing now?! Who knows how many people are watching us right now! Why would she make such a conspicuous gesture toward me right now of all times? Soukichi began to spiral

She mentioned “rewarding” someone. Was that supposed to be a reward? Thinking about it, she also said something about “someone who tells you they like you” ... I’m gonna guess she was referring to me there, Soukichi thought. That means that Kasumi must have known that I was sneakily observing her and listening in on what she was saying when she sent that dastardly wink at me! That’s gotta be it, right?! Ahhh jeez!! I really can’t beat that girl at all. The feeling of defeat is swallowing me whole!

“Pffft,” Tokiya, who was sitting across the table, laughed at the obvious anguish that Soukichi was currently wrestling with. Based on Tokiya’s expression, it was obvious that he too was witness to that devastating wink.

“I’m so jealous of you two! So lovey-dovey!”

“Shaddup and leave me alone,” Soukichi responded wearily to his friend’s jeers.



Kasumi Shiramori. She was one year Soukichi's senior, the president of a circle of which they are the only two members, popular amongst everyone regardless of gender due to her beauty and sociability, and on top of all of that, she was also currently Soukichi Kuroya's girlfriend on a trial basis.

Now then. Why was Soukichi, the textbook definition of a loner, going out with one of the most popular girls in the entire school, even if it was only tentatively? This could all be tracked back to one month prior. First of all, it was important to make clear that, although he was to this day still too embarrassed to admit it, Soukichi was madly in love with Kasumi. From the moment he met her, he was taken with her in a way that could only be described as love at first sight, and over the past year, he had only fallen for her even harder. Naturally, he knew that nothing could ever happen between them given their social standings. Soukichi believed that the only reason she was so kind to him was because, being the social butterfly that she was, that was how she was with everyone, and that he shouldn't misconstrue her kindness as anything more than that. Making that mistake would only result in unnecessary heartbreak for both of them.

Soukichi never thought for a second that he was a good match for her, nor did he think that dating her was even a remote possibility. All that being said, he still couldn't help himself from hoping, praying that maybe he had a shot, despite how futile he knew it to be. This ended up with him practicing his confessions in the clubroom after school when Kasumi wasn't present, as well as having daydreams about how amazing their dates would be if he succeeded. Yet even with how courageous his daydream self was, when it came to the real deal, he was too afraid of being rejected to make any moves at all. Truly a pathetic state of affairs. Anyway, he spent his days treasuring the mere fact that he was able to spend his days together with the upperclassman he loved, while also having to deal with the emptiness and frustration at his inability to take the next step. That was, until one month ago.

It was on one fateful day in May, in the clubroom after school, that a scene like that out a television drama played out that would change their relationship forever.

"You like me, don't you?"

Apparently, the feelings Soukichi thought he had kept cleverly hidden from Kasumi were actually blatantly obvious. Soukichi felt so much shame from having his long standing crush exposed that he wouldn't have minded diving into a shallow grave and being buried alive in that moment. However...

"So... do you wanna try going out with me?"

And it is because of that proceeding development that he couldn't have seen coming for a million years that the man known as Soukichi is currently alive and well today and not rotting in a grave somewhere.

A trial relationship. Soukichi himself didn't really understand what that connoted, but in the end, he decided to go along with Kasumi's proposal, and they started going out with each other.

Wait, that's not quite the full story. "Decided to go along with" is far from an appropriate description of what took place. The reality was far more pathetic, as their relationship wasn't exactly one of equals

"P-Please let me go out with you! I don't care if it's a trial or whatever! Just being with you is enough!"

Recalling the scene alone made Soukichi want to get up and look for that shovel.

His feelings were exposed without any consent whatsoever, and then he was offered a "trial relationship" with a clearly lopsided power dynamic. To make matters worse, he practically begged the other party to agree to the relationship that was being suggested to *him*.

...How lame. In a competition of how fast one could stamp their dignity into mush, Soukichi would definitely rank first.

In any case, thus began the trial relationship between Soukichi and Shiramori: with an utter defeat. To be honest, the situation hadn't fully sunk in yet for him. It'd already been a month since the beginning of their relationship, yet he still felt like he was prancing about in a dreamworld, unable to find solid ground for him to plant his feet on. How could such a beautiful girl possibly be his girlfriend?

"Speaking of which, your guys' one month anniversary is fast approaching,

huh?”

Soukichi’s body still hadn’t fully recovered from the devastating wink attack when Tokiya casually reopened those fresh wounds.

“Y-You idiot! K-Keep your voice down! What if someone hears you?!” Soukichi practically yelled.

“Hm?” his friend asked with a confused look.

“Wh-What if someone hears... that I’m going out... with Shiramori?” Soukichi’s voice gradually lowered more and more until at the end, he was furtively glancing around the room to see if anyone was looking at him, before finally covering part of his mouth and whispering the final words to Tokiya.

“Oh yeah, you guys still haven’t told everyone yet,” Tokiya recalled.

“Exactly...” Soukichi replied.

“What a pain in the ass. What’s the point in hiding it anyways?”

“That’s none of your business.”

After discussing it for a while, Soukichi and Kasumi had eventually decided to hide their relationship for the meantime. Soukichi had already told Tokiya about it, but it seemed that Kasumi had yet to tell anyone else.

“Well, I guess I get where you’re coming from. She’s the closest thing this school has to a celebrity, and any news that she’s got a man is sure to cause a stir, especially if it comes out that it’s someone like you. I can only imagine the kind of rumors that’ll spread.”

“...Yeah, so please be a little more careful.”

There were a plethora of reasons why Soukichi didn’t want others to know about their relationship, but what Tokiya had said practically summed up his main qualms behind announcing it to the school. Soukichi didn’t want to stand out at all. There’s no telling what sort of physical or verbal abuse he’d receive at the hands of his classmates if they find out that a lame introvert like him was dating one of the school idols. Soukichi had zero interest whatsoever in being tormented about it by his classmates.

As for Kasumi, she didn’t seem to particularly care either way.

“Our relationship will get exposed sooner or later, so I want to enjoy having a secret relationship while I can!” said Kasumi

“I mean, I get it and all, but we don’t exactly have to be so careful about bringing it up, you know?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a different story if it’s coming from her, but I highly doubt that anybody would believe any claims that you were dating her.”

“...”

Tokiya’s remark may have been quite hurtful and insulting, but Soukichi couldn’t help but agree. Maybe he didn’t actually need to put so much effort into keeping their relationship private. No matter how thorough an explanation he could come up with regarding how Kasumi became his girlfriend, it’s unlikely that anyone will believe him. They would just think that he had totally lost his mind or something to that effect. Is this perhaps what they call an unbreakable secret protection mechanism? Its efficacy almost brought Soukichi to tears.

“Hey, let’s eat over here instead!” shouted Ann, a tray of food in her hands.

The other two were about to sit down in some seats next to the food lines, but Ann had already walked somewhere slightly further away.

“Ehh? Why over there? It doesn’t really matter where we sit,” Rino pointed out.

“If that’s the case, then we can just sit here, right?” Ann responded.

“Boo! You’re as forceful as ever, Ann. I didn’t even want to come to the cafeteria today to begin with, yet you dragged me along anyway!” Rino whined.

“C’mon. It’s no big deal,” Kasumi attempted to calm down Rino, who was constantly complaining, as she patted her head. In the end, they both walked over to Ann and sat down next to her. This meant that they were now seated quite close to where Soukichi and Tokiya were.

“...Hm?”

That’s when Soukichi realized something. Ann, the first person to sit down, had been periodically glancing in his direction.

This is bad. Did she notice I've been watching them this whole time? God, now she probably thinks I'm a creep. Is she taking pity on me for being a pathetic introvert who can only summon the courage to admire girls from afar?!

Soukichi's paranoia began to run out of control, but naturally, Soukichi wasn't even close in his estimations.

Ann's glances weren't filled with ridicule, nor did she look annoyed. In fact, it was the exact opposite. Ann's face didn't betray any expression, and for some reason, she appeared to be more anxious than anything.

Hang on. She's been taking glances in this direction, and even though I've been practically monitoring them, our eyes still haven't met once. That must mean... she's not been looking at me.

"...Hey, Tokiya. I don't know if it's just me, but does it feel like Ukyou's been looking your way for a while now?"

"Hm?"

A surprised look appeared on Tokiya's face, before he turned around and looked in Ann's direction. Upon which...

"...!"

"What's wrong, Ann-Ann?" Rino chirped.

"N-Nothing," Ann responded.

Ann quickly averted her eyes and immediately turned around in a fluster. From that alone, it's obvious it's not just "nothing" going on.

"Agh—" Tokiya groaned in an annoyed voice while scratching his head, before saying, "It's nothing."

Hmm. Something smells fishy, thought Soukichi. I wonder what's happening there? Actually, thinking back on it, it did feel like Ukyou was sorta pushing for the other two to sit over here... Wait a second, was her goal to—

"Hm?"

Soukichi's thoughts were interrupted by his phone beginning to vibrate in his pocket. He took it out and glanced at it. It was a LINE message from Kasumi.

“Hey there! We’re eating right next to you!” read Kasumi’s light jab

“I see you’re eating in the cafeteria today,” Soukichi responded.

“Yeah, Ann invited me here personally today for some reason.”

From what Soukichi had heard and seen, Kasumi tended to bring her own home-made lunches to school everyday, but she sometimes forgets, which leads to her eating in the cafeteria. The situation today, however, seemed to be of a different nature. Ann must have actively invited Kasumi yesterday; otherwise, Kasumi wouldn’t have ordered from the cafeteria today. The plot thickens...

“By the way...” Kasumi suddenly changed the topic, interrupting Soukichi’s thoughts. “Did you get my wink earlier?”

“...!”

Soukichi had long prepared for this question, so it hadn’t caught him too off guard or anything like that. He was well aware that he’d have to answer something along those lines as soon as Kasumi sent the first message.

“Huh? You winked at me?” Soukichi replied

“Don’t try to weasel your way out of this one! I know you saw it! There’s no use pretending!

“I saw how flustered you got the instant I winked at you!” came Kasumi’s interrogative texts

You were watching?! Soukichi screamed internally. *Then why even bother asking in the first place?*

“Well, I might have seen it. I’m just not entirely sure. Winks are basically another type of blinking, after all. Even if I did see it, it’d have vanished from my memory by now,” Soukichi attempted to brush it off.

“Oh, really now?”

At that moment, Soukichi suddenly felt a chill crawl down his spine before, after a short moment, he received a shocking text teeming with mischief from Kasumi.

“In that case, wink at me, Kuroya.”

What? Soukichi was shocked. *What?!*

“Wait, why?” Soukichi responded.

“You did say winks are just another type of blinking, didn’t you? What’s the problem, then?”

“A man winking is just flat-out creepy.”

“Oh...? Is that so? Okay then.”

To Soukichi’s surprise, Kasumi dropped the matter fairly quickly. Given his prior experiences with her, he was convinced that she would pester him until he eventually broke down enough to do it.

“I just thought it would be so romantic. The two of us, in a public area, secretly winking at each other.”

The somewhat sad and gloomy message tugged greatly at Soukichi’s heartstrings. Though he knew he hadn’t done anything wrong, he still felt extremely guilty for whatever reason. Was Kasumi’s wink from earlier not actually meant as being teasing toward him? Could it just have been a show of affection on her part that she was trying to get him to reciprocate? Maybe she was trying to get something going between the two, with them sharing secret love messages while surrounded by throngs of students. She went to the trouble of doing all that for him, and yet he was really just going to leave her hanging? Could he really live with himself if he did that?

Well... it is possible that Kasumi sent that particular message specifically because she knew how he’d react. However, that didn’t matter. Regardless of whether this was another one of Kasumi’s pranks, focusing so much of his brain power on a simple wink was pathetic. Instead, he might as well go through with it.

Soukichi sighed internally, all the while thinking that he was perfectly capturing the essence of a fool in love. He then silently steeled his resolve, raised his head, and looked over at Kasumi. Whether by coincidence or on purpose, Kasumi was also looking in his direction. It was clear based on her facial expression that she was waiting in eager anticipation. There was no

backing down at this point. After he clenched his teeth in an attempt to suppress his embarrassment, Soukichi opened his eyes wider than usual before closing one of them in a quick wink.

In the next moment...

“Pfft!” Kasumi burst into a bout of laughter uninhibited by those around her. It got to the point that she eventually began to nearly hack up a lung, at which point Ann and Rino began asking her if she was all right.

“Hahahaha! S-Soukichi? What the hell was that! Hahahaha!” Tokiya guffawed.

Tokiya, out of character for him, also began laughing out loud.

“Hahahahahah! What’s up with that funny-ass face out of nowhere, dude? You look like a squashed cicada!” Tokiya followed up, all the while nearly dying of laughter.

“...”

To those unaware of the circumstances, Soukichi’s wink apparently fell into the category of being a “funny face;” one that looked like a squashed cicada at that.



“Pfft! Hahahaha!”

It was after school, and Soukichi and Kasumi were engaged in their usual activities: being alone together in the former literature club room. Kasumi, who was sitting across on the other side of the table from Soukichi, still hadn’t gotten over the apparent hilarity of the wink from earlier. She appeared to be doing her best to reign it in, but she still found it hard to stop herself from cracking up.

“Hahaha! Hehehe! Ahhh!! That was too funny!” Kasumi joyfully said while laughing

“...You’re taking it a bit too far now, don’t you think?” Soukichi said in a sullen tone

“Hehehe! Not even close! Just remembering it makes me start laughing all over again! You really are a man full of surprises, Kuroya!” At least Kasumi’s

words seemed to be genuine. “Yeah, Kuroya, winking definitely doesn’t fit you at all!” Kasumi continued.

“What are you talking about? I did it at lunch, didn’t I?” Soukichi asked.

“Hardly! If anything, you totally failed! Completely and utterly!”

“Well, it’s not exactly something I do too often, so I probably didn’t do the best job at it, but I’m pretty sure I did wink at you there.”

“Nope! Whether or not it was a wink is the last problem you have!”

Her voice still teeming with disbelief, Kasumi took out a pocket mirror from her bag.

“Here. Take a look,” she indicated to the mirror in her hand.

“...”

Soukichi reluctantly accepted the pocket mirror from Kasumi while musing to himself how Kasumi truly was one for exaggeration. How rude she was, to laugh so much at his facial expression. That being said, Soukichi himself wasn’t convinced of his winking abilities either, but it shouldn’t have been weird to the extent that it made Kasumi laugh that much.

He opened the pocket mirror and set it up so that it would clearly reflect his face. He then proceeded to repeat what he did during lunch, and the result was...

“...Wh-What?!”

Soukichi was so shocked by his own face that he entered fight-or-flight mode and ran away from the mirror..

Huh?! Hang on! Soukichi thought. What in the world is going on?! Why did a squashed cicada suddenly spawn in the mirror?!

A more accurate depiction of what happened would be that the face of someone clenching his teeth with one eye wide open and his face distorted such that the left and right were completely asymmetrical appeared in the mirror. It looked relatively similar to the face Miyagi made when giving the alley-oop signal at the start of the Sannoh arc in Slam Dunk, the sort of face you make when yelling “Yiiiiiii.”

“Ahahaha! Yeah, no! I can’t hold it in any longer! That face is too ridiculous!” Kasumi guffawed.

Kasumi burst out into another fit of laughter as Soukichi was still reeling in confusion and despair.

“First of all, why are you even clenching your teeth?” Kasumi asked incredulously.

“Uhh, to psyche myself up, I guess,” Soukichi responded to the best of his ability.

“Wh-What? You make absolutely zero sense! Alright, moving on. What’s up with you opening your eyes that wide?”

“...So I can control my embarrassment.”

“I seriously don’t understand you... Hehehe... Ahahahah!”

Kasumi almost fell out of her seat from laughing, clutching her ribs as if in pain. At this point, Soukichi began to be awash with shame at what he’d done. He never could have imagined that he was so catastrophic at winking.

“Hah... Hah... That was quite the surprise you gave me today! I was just planning on teasing you a little, but I got to see an entirely new side of you!” Kasumi exclaimed as she looked over at Soukichi with an impish smile, having finally managed to control her laughter. Kasumi had returned to her usual self. “I never could’ve imagined you were hiding such an impressive party trick!”

“Party trick?” Soukichi inquired. *Now that’s just mean*, Soukichi mused, *depressed. I’m doing my best over here.*

“Hmph. Whatever. Not like it matters anyways. I ain’t gonna die just because I can’t wink properly,” Soukichi attempted to brush the matter aside.

“Oh, come on! Don’t be like that! I’m sorry for laughing at you, okay?” Kasumi quickly apologized. She finally appeared to be somewhat remorseful.

“I wonder why you can’t wink, though...?”

Kasumi blinked twice in rapid succession at Soukichi, a curious look plastered across her face.

Shit, she's just too cute, Soukichi thought.

"See? It's really easy."

"Geniuses always say that, all the while ignorant of the struggles the common man endures. Are you aware of how much strife such thoughtless remarks incur?"

"You know, you're making a mountain out of a molehill here," Kasumi replied to his joking statement.

She's not wrong, Soukichi conceded to himself. Honestly speaking, Soukichi didn't care that much either way. Not being able to wink really wasn't a big deal.

"It's all good. I just won't wink ever again in my life."

Think positively. This was a learning experience for me. If I hadn't stumbled across it today, it's possible I would have embarrassed myself even more in the future.

"Don't give up just yet! Let's do some practicing!" Kasumi encouraged.

"Practicing?" Soukichi asked.

"Yeah! I'm gonna try teaching you how to wink so you can do it properly in the future!"

"...I mean, it's not exactly life or death if I can't wink, is it?"

"Hmm... Whatever could be the issue?"

She's not listening at all, Soukichi thought. *I don't have a choice in the matter, do I?*

"Maybe we need to do some work on those facial muscles?" Kasumi pondered.

"That may be it. People like me rarely use them, so they end up stiffening up," Soukichi added his own opinion without thinking. "I hear that actors, idols, T.V. personalities, and so on who need to appear in front of people in their line of work have all worked hard on training their facial muscles. That's why their default facial expression is that of a smile, since having a natural smile is crucial

to a good impression.”

Everyone may be born with their facial features and quirks, but you can nevertheless improve your “face” through hard work and dedication. By continually honing your facial muscles, you can construct a “face” that gives off a positive impression to those you meet or walk by in the street.

“They say that someone’s first impression of you determines 90% of what they think of you, which is why having a solid, natural smile is so vital in forming long-lasting relationships with others. Someone with a bright personality that smiles on instinct won’t even have to work that hard to achieve it,” Soukichi continued in a long-winded manner.

“...”

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“Well, I mean...” Kasumi continued with a difficult expression, “You clearly know the benefits of it, so I guess I’m just a little confused as to why you don’t put that knowledge into practice is all.”

“There’s a difference between analyzing something and actually doing it. There’s no guarantee that an expert analyst can become an expert athlete, after all.”

Welcome to being an introvert. Soukichi may have had his own well-defined theories on how communication should work, but he didn’t put any of them to the test, nor did he have any particular interest to. In fact, it wasn’t unusual for him to listen in on his classmate’s conversations and critique where they could do better.

“If it were me, I’d use this rebuttal to win the argument.”

“Wait, what? You should’ve hit them with the punchline earlier if that was how you were gonna do things.”

“You idiot! You should have repeated the gag here! That would’ve guaranteed another round of laughter!”

Soukichi often fantasized, but he would never take action. He knew that if he took that final step, then his world would change forever. However, if it were so

easy to take that step, then nobody would have their doubts about going through with it.

“To summarize, socialites live their days happily with smiles on their faces at all times. This trains their facial muscles so that they naturally smile, and that improves how others perceive them, resulting in them expanding their social circles. A virtuous cycle. As for loners and introverts like me, since I don’t really talk to people, my facial muscles have long since atrophied. That makes me bad at smiling, which causes others to have a negative impression of me. Thus, my social circle sinks, resulting in a vicious cycle.” Soukichi finally ended his tirade.

“Wh-What a tragic conclusion...” Kasumi began with a pitiful remark, “but if it’s your facial muscles that are the problem, then we can definitely fix it.”

She quickly switched back to her usual positive expression, rubbing her cheeks with both hands.

“Try squeezing your cheeks like this.” Kasumi then raised the sides of her mouth using her cheeks. Her facial expression was currently undeniably strange, but Soukichi couldn’t help but find it annoyingly adorable.

“You should be able to revive those dead facial muscles with a little bit of love massaging like this.”

“It’s fine. They are okay with resting with peace.”

“Oh come on! Don’t just give up before even trying!”

“Leave me alone! Why does it matter to you?”

“Of course it matters to me! After all,” continued Kasumi, while getting up from her chair and swinging around towards Soukichi’s side, “I want to see more of your facial expressions, Kuroya.”

She got up and sat down next to Soukichi before brushing him on the cheek, a teasing look now on her face.

“...!”

Soukichi reeled backwards in surprise, yet his face didn’t move. Kasumi didn’t only brush his cheek; she actually gripped firmly onto them with both hands.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Soukichi asked in confusion.

“Hm? You know exactly what I’m doing, don’t you? It’s...” Kasumi paused before whispering cutely, “a massage full of my love.” Her hands then began to move.

Squeeze.

Kasumi gently squeezed Soukichi’s cheeks and began pulling them upwards.

“Wow, Kuroya, your cheeks are surprisingly soft!”

“...”

Hang on, what in the world is going on right now?! Soukichi began to panic. Is Shiramorii seriously squeezing my cheeks right now?! This is way too risque. I know we’re currently dating, but we’ve only held hands once! Are we actually going directly from holding hands to cheeks?!

To Soukichi, this was an unprecedented escalation in their relationship. Although they weren’t doing anything that could be considered “inappropriate,” he couldn’t help feeling that way about it. But, most importantly, he felt unbelievably embarrassed!

“Squeeeeeeze! Squeeze!” Kasumi, ignoring Soukichi’s internal turmoil, continued to play around with his cheeks.

“Hw-Hwait! Prheazu shtopp!”

“Ahahaha! I have no idea what you’re saying!”

“Mngh...!”

“Hey! Try saying, ‘class library’!”

“I rehfyuse.”

“Hehehe! Oh, by the way, if it feels painful at all, please let me know! I’ll stop right away.”

Her smile was filled with sadism, but still Soukichi knew that Kasumi was at heart an incredibly sweet girl, and it was for that reason that he couldn’t find it within himself to resist her.

“...You’re not resisting,” Kasumi mumbled, seemingly unsatisfied after a few seconds of her playing around with Soukichi’s face like a child playing with a

toy.

“...Huh?”

“Aren’t you going to get me back or anything?”

Strangely enough, Kasumi’s voice sounded more disappointed than happy. Soukichi looked back at her once again, and she actually appeared to be slightly embarrassed, almost as if she were expecting something.

“Get you back?”

Kasumi had finally stopped playing around with his cheeks, allowing Soukichi to properly speak. The two of them then stared back at each other, Kasumi’s hands still gripping his cheeks.

“H-How exactly am I gonna do that?”

“Think something up yourself.”

“...!”

Soukichi began to ponder his options. *Alright, what’s the right answer here? Wait, she can’t mean... she wants me to do the same thing she was just doing to me?!*

No way. Totally impossible. Touching Kasumi’s cheeks? Touching her face, even? Such a hurdle was far too high for the current Soukichi to overcome. Holding hands and touching faces were worlds apart in terms of difficulty. To do that, he had to be practically closer than lovers, not to mention it required an immense amount of trust in the person you were doing.

“Oh, I see. I guess Kuroya’s gonna lay down and not try anything once more...”

Upon hearing Kasumi’s provocation, Soukichi felt the blood rush to his head, and a myriad of emotions took over his thought processes. He felt frustration, shame, and, finally, the strongest emotion of all, anger at himself for not daring to fight back despite how far the situation had escalated.

Soukichi took another good look at Kasumi. Her large, beautiful eyes, her long eyelashes, her soft, gentle nose, her shiny, glossy lips. Everything about her was so picture perfect, it felt almost as though she was admiring a masterpiece in a

museum. It was not his place to defile such an exquisite work of art with his filthy hands. It was not his place, yet Soukichi felt the bud of desire and temptation slowly blooming within him. The loftier and more sacred something was, the stronger the desire was to make it yours, after all.

“Y-You really want me to do this?” Soukichi asked with a trembling voice even with his best efforts to contain his nervousness. “A-Alrighty then. Don’t go blaming me for my actions afterwards, though...”

Kasumi opened her eyes in surprise briefly, before quietly smiling. “Go for it. As long as it’s you... I don’t really mind.”

Does she feel safe around me because she knows a beta like me won’t dare to try anything too risky? Or is there a deeper meaning behind it? Soukichi wondered in deep thought.

One way or another, Soukichi’s figurative restraints broke upon him hearing Kasumi say that. He slowly reached out his hand, a maelstrom of lust and sudden courage that overtook his timidity having forced his body into action.

“...Mnn!” Kasumi trembled, but didn’t pull away. She slowly lowered her hands from Soukichi’s face and closed her eyes.

Kasumi Shiramori was now completely defenseless. She patiently waited for Soukichi’s counter attack with no sign of resistance. It was as if she was entrusting her entire being to Soukichi. It was as if she was saying no matter what he dared to do, she would accept it.

Gulp.

Soukichi’s heart was currently beating at an unprecedented pace. His hands continued to rise, moving toward Kasumi’s cheeks—before passing by them without touching them. Finally, his hands nestled gently on the top of Kasumi’s head and patted it a few times.

“...Huh?” Kasumi asked confusedly. At this point, she had opened her eyes, but Soukichi didn’t dare to meet her gaze.

“That’s what you call ‘getting me back’?” she asked.
“...” Soukichi didn’t respond.

“Patting me on the head? That’s it?” Kasumi was incredulous

“...Oh come on now!”

It was at this very moment that Soukichi truly felt what it meant to be the loser in the relationship. That was all he could manage! She’d presented him with the perfect opportunity, and he’d completely squandered it! He even felt apologetic about it! He couldn’t bring himself to even touch her face, and anything beyond that was entirely out of the realm of possibility. It appeared that breaking his figurative restraints wasn’t enough; he had many more locks and chains that kept him from unleashing his more uninhibited side.

Damnit... Soukich bemoaned. Curse my perfect internal crisis management system.

After considerable mental turmoil, Soukichi was only able to muster a feeble pat on the head, which, although is still part of the human body, has the least skin-to-skin contact. Soukichi felt himself going insane at just how much of a beta he was. He hung his head in preparation for whatever Kasumi had coming his way—

“Hmm... Very interesting.”



Soukichi finally glanced back at Kasumi. It seemed that she didn't plan on making fun of him; it was quite the opposite, in fact, as she rubbed the top of her head with an expression of bliss.

"Hehe. You sure got me this time!"

"..." Soukichi was downright perplexed.

Huh? Why does she look... happy?

In contrast to Soukichi, Kasumi appeared to be enjoying herself.



The time for club activities was over, and Soukichi and Kasumi left the club room together as they usually did. It had become a custom for them to walk together to the bicycle rack where Soukichi would always park his bicycle once they'd begun dating. As for what they did after, it would depend on how each of them felt that day. Sometimes, they would head home together; sometimes, they'd take a detour and hang out somewhere else.

"If we keep up that strict routine of practice and massages, you may just be able to wink one day," Kasumi said.

"It's fine. Let's just drop that whole thing. No more winks, no more massages," Soukichi replied.

The two of them had just changed into their outdoor shoes and were heading toward the bike racks. Soukichi wanted to bury today's events into the back of his mind where his darkest memories lay, but Kasumi kept steadfastly bringing it back up.

"You know, Kuroya. You claim your facial muscles have atrophied, but they might not be as dead as you think," Kasumi said with a giggle.

"Huh?"

"In the year that we've known each other, I've seen you make so many different kinds of expressions. Actually, I think you might be more expressive than most people I've met."

"..."

He didn't know why exactly, but Soukichi suddenly felt extremely sheepish.

He wasn't trying to be the super-chill, zero-expressions-ever character, but saying that he was "more expressive than most people" caused his cheeks to flush red all the same.

"During this last month especially, too! Ever since we started going out, you've probably set a record for the amount of different ways someone can blush!" Kasumi exclaimed.

"Ngh... Well, it's not just me! I've seen a lot from you too!" Soukichi's snapped back, his indignation causing him to instinctively retort. "This trial couple thing has also allowed me to see so many different sides to you I never even knew you had."

"Huh? Really? Hmm..." Kasumi pondered for a moment before nodding and smiling. "You may be right. I might just be doing that."

"..."

Damnit! I wanted to turn it around on her, but she immediately hit me back with several times the impact! I really can't win against her...

"Hehehe... I'm looking forward to the rest of the school year," Kasumi said while laughing at Soukichi, who was in the process of drowning in his own self-pity. "We only have less than a year left here, but chances are we're going to see many different sides to each other. After all, we are boyfriend and girlfriend now."

"Only on a trial basis, though..."

"Even so!"

Kasumi Shiramori was in her third year, which made this her final year in high school. The two met in the spring of last year, and seeing as they'd spent a lot of time together as members of the same club, they'd experienced most of the major events that take place throughout the school year together already. Summer break, the sports festival, the art festival, field trips, winter vacation, Christmas, Valentines Day...

And although the school calendar hadn't changed, their relationship had changed drastically. They were no longer just an underclassman and their senior. Their relationship had moved up a level, and the same events under

different circumstances would take on a whole different meaning. This meant that their daily interactions and, naturally, their personalities would also change.

Soukichi couldn't help but feel immense anticipation for what was to come throughout the year, and despite it only being on a trial basis, he was still technically dating Kasumi. He was so excited to see all the new versions of Kasumi that were hiding, waiting to be revealed someday.

Chapter Two

Suspicious of Infidelity

Concepts such as infidelity and adultery always felt completely foreign to the world that Soukichi lived in. When he watched TV, talk shows would periodically air the latest celebrity cheating scandal, but he had never really taken much interest in it all. The most such incidents would garner from him was him cursing the frivolity of it all. Only today did he realize that he may have treated the matter a little too casually. Never could he have imagined the day would come where he would be wrapped up in a scandal like that, and as a result, he hadn't prepared for it in the slightest.

Because... Soukichi thought, I can hardly even believe I'm in a relationship as is, let alone cheating on someone.

"..."

"..."

A painful silence dominated the clubroom, with Kasumi and Soukichi being the only ones in the room. Usually, the two would be sitting across from each other, but not today. Kasumi was currently sitting in her chair, but Soukichi, however, was currently down on his knees on the floor. Nobody had particularly ordered him to do so; he just somehow ended up in that position before he even realized it. In the wake of the cross aura Kasumi was emanating, Soukichi couldn't find the strength within him to sit across from her. His knees simply buckled on their own, and thus he was now practically prostrate on the floor.

After more heavy silence, Kasumi let out an exaggerated sigh. "You know... I'm truly shocked. You were the last person I expected to pull something like this behind my back..."

"..."

Soukichi felt his stomach churn as Kasumi looked down at him with eyes that were filled with 70% disappointment and 30% anger. She was practically

exuding frigid indifference, which contrasted greatly with her normal bubbly, carefree attitude. She currently had a phone in her hand, as well; however, this wasn't her own phone, but Soukichi's, and on its screen was the conclusive evidence that had led to this situation in the first place.

"This right here is proof that you've been cheating on me," Kasumi declared

"What?! H-Hang on a sec!" Unable to bear it any longer, Soukichi began attempting to refute Kasumi. "That can't count as cheating, right? It was nowhere near that extreme..."

"That's what they all say," Kasumi flippantly dismissed his explanations.

"..." Soukichi fell silent.

"You at the very least knew that what you were doing was wrong, didn't you? That's exactly why you tried so hard to keep it from me."

"Well..." Soukichi had no means to refute the barrage of accusations.

How did it all come to this? Soukichi groaned to himself, How in the hell am I, a noted introvert, being accused of philandering by my girlfriend?!



Time to flash back to ten minutes ago, back before this tragedy took place.

"Hey, Kuroya," Kasumi, who was sitting across from Soukichi with her usual smile, casually posed a question from out of nowhere. "What do you think falls under the category of 'cheating' in a relationship?"

"Cheating?"

"Yeah. We talked about it a little while back. You know, when you brought up the topic of dating."

"Oh yeah..." Soukichi said as he began recalling the conversation in question. When the two of them first began talking about trial relationships, Kasumi had brought up how it was something akin to what Westerners did in their dating lives, to which Soukichi dug himself his own grave by asking if that meant seeing other people was an option. And what happened after that, Soukichi preferred not to remember.

"Right now, we're in a trial period with no cheating allowed whatsoever, but I

realized that we haven't clearly defined what falls under that umbrella yet. I mean, what's considered cheating varies from person to person," Kasumi continued.

"True," Soukichi agreed.

She was right; if you asked, say, 10 people what the definition of cheating was, you'd likely get 10 unique answers. As far as the law is concerned, infidelity can only occur when the two parties in question have gotten physically intimate. No matter how much they love and cherish each other, as long as there's nothing physical between them, then it doesn't count as cheating. This means the opposite of this dynamic, being casual hookups without any real strings attached, is definitive proof of infidelity.

However, those legal parameters are only applied to couples that were married or engaged. In situations where that isn't the case, the aforementioned laws lose their effect. The bars set by each individual in a relationship like that thus become incredibly important.

"For example, Ann cut things off with her boyfriend because he was cheating on her. Calling him a cheater would be an understatement, actually..." Kasumi brought up the love life of one of her friends and four pillars of the Four Heavenly Beauties — Ann Ukyou.

Oh, she had a boyfriend?

"Her ex made a habit of attending mixers while they were still dating. He claimed that going to mixers wasn't cheating, but Ann wouldn't back down and told him that going to them without letting her know *was* cheating, and they broke up just like that."

Hmm, I see.

Soukichi felt like he understood how both points of view were valid, while at the same time not fully comprehending either, being the major introvert that he was.

"What about you, Kuroya?" Kasumi asked.

"Hmm... I think I lean more toward Ann's side here," Soukichi decided. He wasn't just saying that because Ann was one of Kasumi's friends; he genuinely

believed her to be in the right. “I mean, come on. Going to mixers without telling your girlfriend has to be cheating.”

“Oh... so then you wouldn’t go to one if you were dating someone already?” Kasumi asked.

“I wouldn’t get invited in the first place. Also, I wouldn’t exactly be chomping at the bit to go to one even if I were in a relationship.”

Having to spark up conversations with an inordinate number of girls? Sounds more like torture than anything to be honest.

Soukichi understood that there were people out there who found that sort of thing fun, and he had no intention of getting into any heated arguments over it, but he himself would never attend one in a million years. He could already imagine how it would play out: he would show up, utterly fail at not standing out and playing the cool, aloof character he was known for. He would then act strangely obsequious and try way too hard to impress everyone before falling flat on his face. He would then trudge his way back home, regretting that he was ever born. Why would he ever want to subject himself to that hell? People couldn’t pay him to agree to go to one; he’d actually rather pay others to *not* make him go.

“In any case, the mixer isn’t what’s so problematic. What is problematic is that he went without letting his girlfriend know,” Soukichi pointed out.

“Secretly texting somebody, going out without informing your significant other, attending mixers. All that counts as cheating in my book. Purposefully keeping anything like that from your partner is already proof enough that you’re aware what you’re doing is wrong and you want to keep it a secret,” Kasumi said.

“I see...”

“Besides, as soon as you start wondering whether something you’re about to do falls under ‘cheating,’ it’s probably already too late. It’s not important how the public at large feels about it. The most important thing is how your girlfriend feels about it. Or at least, that’s what I believe.”

Soukichi strongly agreed with Kasumi. When you’re dating someone, you

shouldn't do anything to hurt them, and you should also avoid anything that makes them uncomfortable in any way, shape, or form.

"Any self-respecting boyfriend wouldn't be doing anything that their girlfriend doesn't want them to be doing," Soukichi declared.

"..." Kasumi remained silent.

"Everyone views relationships differently anyways, and forcing someone to cut ties with any friends from the opposite gender the instant they get into a relationship is tough, since it's basically denying the possibility of platonic cross-gender relationships, but I aspire to be that type of boyfriend."

Soukichi didn't feel like, nor did he have the right to, lecture others on how they should handle their relationships; he wasn't in any position to. In the end, he simply had his own views on the ideal image of a boyfriend that he wanted to be.

"..." Kasumi quietly listened to Soukichi's declaration.

Huh? Why isn't she responding? Did I say something stupid again? Ugh, I must've gotten way too into it, and now she thinks I'm really creepy, doesn't she?! I imagine she's thinking about how far up my own ass I am right now!
Soukichi began to spiral.

As Soukichi began regretting ever opening his mouth, Kasumi suddenly opened her mouth and said with a dazzling smile on her face, "You're a good boyfriend, Kuroya. Whoever ends up dating you long-term is gonna be one lucky gal. She'll practically be drowning in your love."

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm... This and that," Kasumi replied, her expression full of fulfillment.

Soukichi couldn't help but avert his eyes. "You're exaggerating. I'm nothing more than an unpopular loner. Say I wanted to cheat, no way would I even be able to."

Soukichi was being serious. He didn't know any girls other than Kasumi, to the point that, outside of his own family, she remained the only girl contact on his phone at the moment. How could he even attempt to cheat in the first place?

Soukichi didn't have much in terms of charms or appeal he could use to pick up women, but one thing he could confidently assert was that he'd never cheat. He wasn't interested in doing so to begin with, but it wasn't like he had many options for women as is. Even if the very, very, very small opportunity to cheat arose, it would never happen.

Hypothetically, if Soukichi had perhaps grown up to be a really social smokeshow that had ladies lining up to be with him, there's a chance he would've succumbed to the temptation to cheat. His relationships might've fallen apart, causing heartache and pain to both his girlfriend and the girl he filandered with.

At that moment, Soukichi felt blessed to have not been born with such amazing genetics. The life of an unpopular loner suited him much better. Soukichi didn't think he could deal with the hijinks that the protagonist in a romantic-comedy harem anime did. With how everything was currently, he didn't even have to ponder hurting someone close to him.

Soukichi's relief suddenly turned into a strange sense of gloom. He was unsure about whether his outlook leaned too much toward the positive or the negative.

"Hmm... I don't know about that."

Soukichi was convinced that his logic was soundproof. However, it appeared that Kasumi was skeptical about the matter.

"I have no idea why, but you're always low on yourself and putting yourself down. You know what? I think that if you had the chance to interact more with girls, you'd actually be quite popular."

"What?"

That's going a little too far even for flattery.

Soukichi couldn't even imagine what it would be like to be popular and have multiple girls interested in him at once. Hell would freeze over first. Attracting the attention of a girl like Kasumi likely consumed at least half of the luck the universe would give him already.

"That's crazy. There's no way I'll ever be popular."

“You say that, but I bet you’re a huge hit with the ladies, and neither you or I know it yet. I’d even go so far as to say you’ve been chatting up a cute girl behind my back.”

“...Feel free to check my message history, then.” After a heavy sigh, Soukichi took out his phone, opened the LINE app, and set it on the table.

“Huh? I-I’m good. I don’t want to intrude on your privacy, after all,” Kasumi declined his offer, clearly surprised. It looked like she hadn’t been serious in her proposal and was only saying that as a way to tease him.

“I’d hate to be the kind of girl that snoops around her boyfriend’s messages,” she continued.

“That’s very noble of you. You have my permission, though. Go ahead,” Soukichi insisted.

“But...”

“I don’t want there to be any distrust between us, so if it’ll help alleviate any doubts you have, then I’m willing to help.”

“Well, since you offered...”

Although Kasumi was clearly hesitant, Soukichi obstinately insisted on having her check anyway. Kasumi’s fingers tapped the screen, opening up Soukichi’s message logs.

“...Oof,” Kasumi said, cringing somewhat. “You... really don’t have many contacts. Not to mention your message count is... oh man.”

“Hmph.” Soukichi pouted.

“Actually, pretty much all of the messages here are between you and I, save for the odd interaction with your mom or Tokiya...”

“I told you so.”

“This isn’t really something to be proud of, you know.”

“You believe me now, right? I don’t want to and cannot cheat on you. I’m just your typical unpopular kid,” Soukichi stated with a great deal of pride, but thinking about it, maybe that sort of tone didn’t fit exactly.

Why am I trying to show off my lack of popularity as a good thing?! Well, whatever. Thinking about it anymore will probably send me into a pit of depression. Time to move on.

“I have virtually no male contacts, let alone female contacts. How is a man like me ever gonna cheat? It’s just not possible,” Soukichi said.

“Okay, okay, no need to continue dragging yourself through the mud. This is my bad, okay? I’m sorry for doubting you,” Kasumi quickly apologized.

With a slight shrug of her shoulders, Kasumi attempted to pass Soukichi back his phone. Right then, likely out of instinct, Kasumi swiped her finger in order to close the LINE application and return to the home screen. However, since Soukichi had a different phone altogether from her, it didn’t do what she’d intended.

“Whoops, sorry. Looks like I did something weird... Huh?”

“...Mnn? Ahh!”

Soukichi suddenly let out a strange yelp. Kasumi’s blunder had caused her to accidentally open a certain application, and on that application was something that Soukichi had never wanted her to see.



There ends the recollection. We now transition back to the present, where Soukichi is prostrated before Kasumi as he’s being accused of cheating. A present Soukichi really could’ve done without returning to...

“Wow, now what do we have here? Look, I know It’s rude to look at things like this without your permission, and it is my fault for accidentally opening it, but now that I’ve laid my eyes on it, I can’t just shove this under the rug and forget about it,” Kasumi said as she began to showcase her disappointment in an overtly exaggeratory manner, while practically shoving the phone screen in front of Soukichi’s face.

“I could’ve never imagined in my wildest dreams that you read such dirty books.”

“...!” Soukichi stayed silent, all the while cringing in pain.

The screen was currently displaying the cover for a digital book that Soukichi

had bought. On the cover was a fashionable beauty drawn in the typical anime style. Armed with an extremely lurid facial expression and posed in a way that exposed her cleavage, the art made it obvious at first glance exactly what type of book it was.

Shit! I screwed up! My girlfriend has found my spank bank!

The usual pattern that was often seen in manga and anime was the girlfriend coming over and accidentally discovering their boyfriend's secret stash hidden somewhere in their room. However, for Soukichi it deviated from that, with his girlfriend coming across it on his phone. Advancements in both technology and electronic devices has allowed phones to be capable of holding a large number of books, allowing you to read them whenever and wherever you want. One side effect to all that was the risk of your lewd pastimes being discovered had significantly increased.

Uh oh... Ahhh!! This is bad!!

After reading some of the book last night, Soukichi had simply hit the home button and fallen asleep soon after. And it was because of this carelessness that the instant Kasumi clicked on the Books icon, the app displayed the last book he read. The title of that book was—

“Do you like Horny Cougars? Noriko's Virgin Sex Lesson.”

It was at that moment that Soukichi finally realized the appeal of keeping a cyanide pill tucked behind his molars.

“Sigh... Just perfect. This is undeniable proof that you've been cheating on me! You have a perfectly good girlfriend, and yet you're still reading pervy stuff like this? How is this not cheating?”

“W-Wait a second...!” Soukichi felt his heart being torn to shreds from Kasumi's gaze of scorn peering down at him. Some strange force, though—perhaps the desire to maintain his dignity as a man—urged him to squeeze out a response. “Uh... Yeah, I admit it. I own pornography. If I were to be cliché, I guess I'd claim that those books aren't mine and that they belong to a friend or something like that, but that doesn't really work for electronic books. I'll man up and admit that yes, I bought those books of my own free will.”

“How is that manly again?” Kasumi quipped.

“However,” continued Soukichi, “owning porno can’t be cheating, yeah?”

Soukichi felt as if he was currently representing all of the men in the world. Just about every young man, during a certain time in their lives, all secretly begin purchasing and owning such articles as dirty magazines or porn books. They don’t just suddenly throw out or delete them as soon as they get married or get themselves a girlfriend. Because in the end, men never stop being men!

“Owning anything like that cannot simply be considered as cheating. I doubt there’s a single man on this planet who would sit idly by and accept the condemnation that the possession of pornography equals cheating.”

“Huh? But... you’re having ‘strange thoughts’ about a girl that isn’t your girlfriend. Isn’t that cheating?”

“B-Books like these are nothing more than works of fiction or mere fantasies to engage in. They have zero bearing on reality whatsoever.”

“Sure, it may be fictional, but imagine yourself in my shoes right now.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s say I had naked pictures of some guy that wasn’t you, and I would have dirty thoughts about that guy when you weren’t around and didn’t tell you about it. Would you be okay with that?”

“Th-That’s...” Soukichi stammered.

No. I would very much not be okay with that...

Upon imagining Kasumi having dirty thoughts about a guy that wasn’t him, Soukichi felt an uncomfortable sensation well up inside him that he couldn’t even begin to describe. Her example wasn’t real and remained purely in the realm of fiction; despite that, that felt to him like somebody had cuckolded him right before his very eyes. His head was practically on the verge of exploding with shame!

“See?! Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, right?” Kasumi argued.

“B-But...” Soukichi tried to counter.

“You said so yourself earlier. ‘The most important thing is how your girlfriend feels.’” Kasumi said, practically throwing a knockout blow.

“Ngh...” Soukichi groaned.

“Weren’t you going on about how you aspired to be the kind of boyfriend that would never dare do anything your girlfriend didn’t like?”

“A-Agh...”

The lip service that he had so casually dished out earlier had come back to haunt him, and Soukichi began to feel strangled by the arrogant idealism that he had perpetuated.

Shit! Why did I have to say all those cool lines?!

Now that his own words were being used against him, Soukichi no longer stood any chance of winning.

“Ngh... Mngh... Gah...” Soukichi tried to argue back, but failed and became fed up with himself.

No longer able to drag his way out of this situation, Soukichi concluded that the only option left available to him was to delete all the suggestive content within his phone, then beg wholeheartedly for forgiveness.

“...Pfft! Ahahaha!” Kasumi burst into laughter. “Ahahahaha! I’m so sorry, Kuroya, no need for the pained expression! I don’t consider this cheating!”

“Huh?” Soukichi lifted his head and dumbfoundedly stared at Kasumi. Her face had been full of contempt before, and now she had abruptly shifted back to her usual grin.

“Did you really think I’d lose it on you just because you were reading porn?” Kasumi asked.

“...” Soukichi couldn’t muster a response.

“It doesn’t really make sense to me, but every guy your age has stuff like this, right?”

“Uh... Well, probably. Yeah.”

“You guys are... wired differently when it comes to this sort of thing, I guess.

You don't mean anything romantic by it. You're just letting out your sexual urges. Am I on the right track?"

"Yeah..."

"In that case, what's the big deal? I'm not that insecure," Kasumi said with a wry smile on her face.

Kasumi's current perspective was a complete 180 from what she was saying earlier, and she was now showing a profound understanding of male psychology. A frightening level of understanding, Soukichi would go so far as to say.

Just who is this girl? She is absolutely the most perfect girlfriend in the world!!

"What was up with your accusations, then?" Soukichi asked quizzically.

"Hm? Well, maybe I kinda felt like poking fun at you a little bit," Kasumi replied with immense coyness. She looked to be thoroughly enjoying Soukichi's confusion and pain.

"You had just gotten done giving such a cool speech on cheating, and then immediately afterwards shot yourself in the foot by accidentally showing me your fetish material. How could I not tease you about it?" Kasumi joked.

"..."

Soukichi felt all of the tension flow out of his body. It had all just been another instance of Kasumi's trademark teasing toward him. He wasn't exactly thrilled at having been used as her source of entertainment once again, but the relief he felt was much stronger.

Thank goodness. I was worried that she was finally done with me... and I'm so glad I don't have to delete any of my books. Soukichi heaved a sigh of relief internally.

Feeling entirely relaxed, Soukichi began to get to his feet, not realizing that his personal hell was only just beginning.

"Hmm? Oh my..." Kasumi said.

Kasumi had suddenly started perusing through the book that'd just been his very shame. That's right—it was "Do you like horny Cougars?"

“Woah... This book gets pretty extreme...” Kasumi was in awe.

“Wait! Why are you reading through it?!” Soukichi yelped.

“Felt curious.”

“Stop, please! Give me back my phone!” Flustered, Soukichi reached out his hand in an attempt to retrieve his phone, but Kasumi deftly dodged him.

“Huh? Come on. I’m only gonna read through a little bit! ...You know, based on the cover, I thought this was a manga at first, but it’s actually a book. It has a few illustrations included inside, like a light novel,” Kasumi said

The book in question fell under the genre of “erotic light novel.” It was a novel composed a few pictures dotting its pages, just like a typical light novel, but its main distinction was the presence of more explicit sex scenes and illustrations. Even authors who released straight-forward titles under more normal labels had recently dipped their toes into the erotic light novel, as well.

“So you also use books to satisfy your sexual urges...? That fits you way too well, Kuroya.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Oh...? Wow, that is nut! The heroine in this story has a J-cup! A bit much, don’t you think?”

“W-What’s the big deal? It’s all fictional anyways.”

““The heroine was drying her undergarments until they were stolen by someone... The culprit is a boy living nearby who she’s known for quite some time’ ...Huh? The main character is a panty thief! I mean, the heroine forgives him for it and all, but that has to be some sort of crime”

“We-Well, again, all fictional...”

Wait just a goddamn minute. What the heck is happening right now?! Not only did my girlfriend find my porn book, now she’s reading it right in front of me?! Does she get off on this?!

“Sheesh, this cougar’s breasts are gigantic,” Kasumi noted as she continued to read through the novel, ignoring the inner turmoil going on inside of Soukichi. “I wouldn’t exactly call mine small, but they’re nothing compared to these,”

Kasumi then muttered while looking down at her own chest.

There, two prominent bulges pushed up against the thin fabric of her summer uniform. She may not have been a J-Cup, but they were more than big enough. Soukichi followed Kasumi's gaze downwards toward her breasts, as if drawn in by them, and, of course, that turned out to be a trap.

"Pervert," Kasumi said, concealing her breasts in an exaggerated fashion, all the while wearing a facial expression that seemed to imply she'd been waiting for him to do that.

Soukichi's shame levels were off the charts.

"Th-That was totally unavoidable! Humans have a tendency to follow the gaze of who they're talking to! I was just doing it out of instinct!" Soukichi attempted to justify himself.

"Ahaha! That so? Okay, I buy it!" Kasumi cooed.

After briefly laughing, Kasumi returned her attention to the erotic novel.

"Wow... All of these developments happen at such a rapid pace. I'm also not sure how to feel about trying to argue that 'it doesn't count as cheating as long as you don't go all the way,' though..."

"Please have mercy on me already..." Soukichi weakly begged and reached his hand out again, but Kasumi still refused to give up his phone.

"Not yet! I want to read a little bit more. As your girlfriend, it is imperative that I have a good understanding of my boyfriend's preferences!" Kasumi teasingly declared.

She had gotten her hands on the ultimate toy, and she wasn't willing to give it up that easily. She was entirely in her element, and, as if a switch had been flicked deep within her, she took things one step further.

"Did you really want my underwear that badly?"

"--?!"

You're kidding me! Not this of all things!

Kasumi had begun to read the novel out loud. More specifically, she was

reciting the dialogue of the story's main heroine, Noriko Takayama, a twenty-nine-year-old married woman with no kids whose husband was currently working overseas, leaving her in a perpetual state of sexual frustration for three years straight.

“W-We can't! G-Get a hold of yourself! I'm married, you know!” Kasumi narrated.

“H-Hang on a minute, Shiramori!” Soukichi yelled.

“What?! You use my underwear every night to...?! Y-Young men's sexual drives really are something...” Kasumi continued to read.

“P-Please stop! I'm begging you!!”

“Hee-hee! Kuroya! Your face looks like a tomato right now!” Kasumi exclaimed as she glanced over at the frazzled Soukichi in amusement before continuing to read.

“Sheesh, men all have quite the thing for breasts, don't they?” Noriko said in exasperation. However, in spite of herself, she could feel her heart beginning to race. Her mature, womanly body, whose urges hadn't been satisfied by her husband in what felt like forever, was now throbbing with desire.”

Kasumi had even gotten to the point where she was reading the narration. Her tone had been relatively flat and emotionless at first, but at some point, she had started throwing in some flair. Kasumi only continued to torture Soukichi, her face full of sadistic pleasure.

“Fine... But only a little, okay? And anything under the clothes is off-limits. That way, it shouldn't count as cheating...’ As she felt the young man's gaze practically burning a hole in her, Noriko slowly took off her—”

“No! Please! Listen to me!”

“Kyaa! Ah! H-Hang on! I wasn't ready! S-Stop!’ No longer able to control himself, the young boy pounced on Noriko and began aggressively kneading her breasts. ‘Ahhh! P-Please stop!’ Although she was telling him to stop, by this point, Noriko had already pretty much accepted the boy's advances. In fact, she didn't just lay there and let him do everything. She was about to take action her —”

“W-Wait!”

““Oh! Wow, you’re already so hard... Your pen—”

“Shiramori!”

Only after Soukichi was on the verge of tearing his vocal cords did the dramatic recitation finally come to a close.

“What’s the matter, Kuroya? Was it really that embarrassing?”

“Y-Yeah, it really was... How about you, Shiramori?” Soukichi said while attempting to suppress his embarrassment.

“Huh?” Kasumi asked, looking surprised.

“I assume that reading such perverted lines from a novel like that would get you really flustered. It honestly sounds way worse for you than it was for me, and I had to endure listening to it.”

The whole experience had been incredibly embarrassing for him. Indeed, it was like some new offshoot of the humiliation fetish. But when Soukichi thought more about it, if this were a video game, shouldn’t Kasumi have received even more damage than he had? Kasumi had been so focused on taking the offensive that she hadn’t noticed the damage that she was inflicting on herself. She was swinging a double-edged sword without even realizing it.

“I mean, reading that sort of stuff out loud is something you’d see as a punishment on late-night variety shows. Even if you were just trying to tease me, you really didn’t have to go sacrificing yourself in the process...”

“...Uuu?!”

Kasumi looked incredibly dumbfounded, and her face immediately flushed bright red before turning away from Soukichi so as to not let him see her.

“Wh-What’s the big deal? I’m not embarrassed. Nope, not at all. Erotic novels are still just novels, after all. I’m not some narrow-minded person who’ll discriminate based on genre,” Kasumi rattled off, her speech clearly faster than it normally was. “Oh yeah! I just remembered, I have something important I need to get done! Sorry, I’ll see you later!”

Kasumi then left the phone on the table and rapidly escaped the room, all

without facing Soukichi once.

“Hah...” Now left alone in the room, Soukichi let out a deep sigh as he plopped himself down in his chair. “Seriously, what was that all about?”

The lingering excitement from earlier had yet to fade, and his mind hadn’t calmed down enough to work properly. Despite all that, Soukichi ensured that the part of his brain responsible for memory management was operating on all cylinders, and he tried his utmost to burn all of those erotic lines Kasumi had read deep inside his memory banks.

“...I should’ve let her go on for a bit longer,” Soukichi couldn’t help but murmur to himself.

Seeing as Kasumi had already made a hasty departure, Soukichi had no reason to stay in the clubroom by himself, and he soon left, as well. He exited through the school’s entranceway and began walking toward the bike racks. They had recently developed a habit of doing this sort of thing together, so he felt oddly lonely now that she wasn’t beside him this time.

“...”



Having finally realized that fact, Soukichi felt the urge to break out into laughter.

I never imagined that I of all people would ever feel lonely... Soukichi mused.

He has assumed that such a feeling had long since perished during his time in elementary school. Since then, he hadn't ever truly felt uncomfortable on his lonesome, and it was more the way that those around him assumed that he was just putting on a front while secretly cursing how lonely he was that was harder to deal with. He never thought that the day would come where he would actually feel lonely due to someone not being there.

Sigh... I am such a wuss now. Just how much have I been changed by that girl?

"Hah..." Soukichi could only heave a slight sigh at how things had turned out.

"Hey, you! Wait up!"

Soukichi's sentimental moment was completely ruined by the sound of someone shouting at him. He instinctively turned out and saw a girl running in his direction.

"Hah... Finally found ya!" A slightly panting gal-ish beauty stopped just in front of Soukichi and looked at him. It was the famed "Tanned Gal," Ann Ukyou.

"Man, ya really made me work up a sweat. I thought ya'd still be in the clubroom around this time, so I headed over there ta check, but to my surprise, nobody was there!"

"..."

Me? Is she talking to me? ...Heh, you won't fool me that easily. This must be one of those times where it seems like they're talking to you, but they're actually talking to the person behind you! I got you sussed!

Still under that impression, Soukichi looked around him, and, contrary to expectations, he found that there was nobody else in the vicinity.

"...Huh? Are you talking to me?" Soukichi asked.

"What? Well, you're the only one here, aren't you?" Ann pointed out.

"Well, I guess so..."

She had a point, but Soukichi had yet to fully grasp the situation. A girl other than Kasumi actively talking to him was already an unimaginable scenario to begin with, let alone that girl being one of the “Four Heavenly Beauties” that sit atop the school’s social caste system.

“You’re the only other member of the circle Kasumi’s a part of, yeah?”

“You’d be correct..”

“Then yeah, I’m lookin’ for you,” Ann said with a voice brimming with confidence.

At this point, Soukichi’s life bar was already flashing red.

Ahh, this is bad. I’m not used to this level of proactiveness.

Ann possessed three traits that Soukichi had immense trouble dealing with: older, female, and sociable. Simply interacting with individuals of that ilk caused him stress to no end, even bordering on the level of fear. Actually, that would mean Kasumi also fit those criteria... Let’s just say she’s an exception.

“Are you looking for Shiramori? She already went home for today,” Soukichi informed her. He assumed that the only reason Ann would be looking for him would be regarding something involving Kasumi.

Ann shook her head before jerking out her chin and saying, “I’m not lookin’ for her. I was lookin’ fo’ you.”

“Huh?!” Soukichi squawked.

Ignoring Soukichi’s confusion, Ann continued, “This ain’t the best place to talk. Let’s head somewhere a lil’ more private.”

Chapter Three

Becoming A Wingman

A theory, coined the “popularity period,” explains that all humans go through a period of their life where they become surprisingly attractive to others. This phenomenon is supposedly seen in both men and women and is supposed to occur roughly three times over the span of one’s lifetime.

Of course, this is all just a theory with no real evidence to prove its legitimacy; actually, it could be considered more of an urban legend than anything. Soukichi had no problem dismissing the whole notion in the past, but based on what was currently happening to him, he was forced to consider whether or not the theory was true after all.

It is a time in which developments you’d only see in harem anime began to occur, like multiple members of the opposite gender all of a sudden beginning to hit on you. Soukichi, however, found it hard to believe that sort of period in life could possibly happen once, let alone three times.

When delving deeper into the matter, though, there might be more to this mere “urban legend” than initially thought to be; it even somewhat makes sense. Although acquiring concrete evidence to prove the theory is somewhat tricky, there are legitimate arguments to be made for its existence.

For example, a commonly seen theory that has no relation to the “population period” is that once a person begins dating someone, they suddenly become a lot more popular and are seen as more attractive to those around them, for whatever reason. There are several explanations for why this may be the case. For one, it’s entirely possible that person might have undergone some important internal or external changes from having gotten a partner that increased their attractiveness to others. That being said, the simplest explanation for the phenomenon comes down to a primal, animalistic, competitive drive that pushes people to steal other people’s mates and make them their own.

For men, at least, a girlfriend could end up being a major source of

confidence. In contrast, men who are desperate to enter a relationship come across as needy and thus can't be seen as desirable. Of course, it is required for men to put in effort to get a girlfriend, but if you want girls to like you, you have to make it seem that you aren't trying too hard.

It might feel like a difficult obstacle to overcome at first, but upon achieving your goal, that understandable desperation is replaced by a muted confidence. This makes sense, seeing as you're no longer working as hard to become popular with women. Out of this struggle comes another effect, in that both the outlooks of the man in question and the women around him change.

The women will typically relax and let their guard down under the impression that a taken man won't pursue other women. This could lead to figurative chinks in their armour that can be breached by that same man's unforeseen advances, which then causes new flowers of love to bloom.

Men, upon acquiring a girlfriend, gain in confidence and popularity, particularly to the women around him. Is that not what defines the phenomenon that is the "popularity period"?

So if that theory was true, someone who mastered the art of the unpopular unsociable loner, somebody with no real experience with girls in the past, could suddenly become a hot property after acquiring a girlfriend. This newfound popularity, then, could lead to a buffet of girls trying to get his attention, leading to countless harem-esque troubles.

Well, in the end, it's all just speculation. Well, that was a lot of time spent on a concept...

"...Hey, you're good friends with Shimokura, ain'tcha?"

... that, in the end, had nothing to do with Soukichi.

The two of them were currently in a karaoke bar located across the street from the train station. Soukichi had more or less been forcibly dragged here by Ann, apparently so they could talk in private. Ann booked their reservation without issue through the membership app, and the two of them entered their designated room. She seemed to be a regular at this establishment.

The room Ann chose was a very cramped, private room, and she appeared to

be quite restless right after walking in. She had managed to ask that earlier question after having seemingly worked up enough courage.

“Come on. A-At least say something,” Ann said.

“...Huh? Oh, sorry. Uh... We were talking about Tokiya Shimokura?” Soukichi asked.

“Yeah. Him,” Ann replied.

“Well... Yeah. you could say we’re friends. We get along well enough,” Soukichi answered.

“O-Oh? So it was all true, then. I heard from some second years that the two of you hang out and all that. To be honest, it’s hard to believe you two being friends. You’re just... so different, ya know?”

Ann was trying to be tactful with how she worded it, but Soukichi could practically hear her saying how ludicrous it was for a tall, handsome hunk to be hanging out with a loser like him.

“I mean, we have known each other since middle school.”

“Legit?”

“We don’t do things like hang out with each other over the weekend or anything, though. We’re mostly just school friends, in the end.”

Giving the appropriate response, Soukichi began piecing the puzzle of what was going on together, which based on recent events, he had managed to figure out more or less.

I see... She’s got a thing for Tokiya, huh?

When she had come to the cafeteria the other day, Soukichi had sensed Ann staring an unusual amount in his direction the entire time. Thinking back on it now, it hadn’t been him that she’d been focusing on, but Tokiya. Chances are she hadn’t even paid attention to him once right from the beginning. The only reason she had come looking for him was because of his friendship with the guy she possibly has the hots for. This whole situation appeared to not affect her, too, proving that to Ann, he was pretty much the equivalent of air.

Not that he was surprised by that, mind you. If he were just that bit more self-

conscious, he might just have misinterpreted her intentions and come to the entirely incorrect conclusion that his “popularity period” had arrived, which would’ve only led to unnecessary pain. Thankfully, Soukichi hadn’t made such a crucial mistake whatsoever, even for a moment. He definitely wasn’t desperately coming up with ways to let her down easy without hurting Ann’s feelings the entire way here.

“Anyways... Oh, right. That. Tell me your name,” Ann practically demanded while scratching her head.

“...” Soukichi remained silent.

Asking for someone’s name was usually how you *began* a conversation. Ann really did not seem to care whatsoever about Soukichi.

“...It’s Kuroya,” Soukichi finally answered.

“Kuroya, huh? Last name?” Ann further continued.

“That is my last name. It’s spelled using the kanji for “black” and “arrow.” As for my first name, that’s Soukichi.”

“Huh? What’s up with your last name sounding like a first name?”

There was no real point in complaining about it, Soukichi thought. What was he supposed to do? Go back in time and take up the issue with his ancestors, who began using that name during the Meiji restoration when people started insisting on implementing class equality?

“Well, whatever. Nice to meet ya, Kuroya. I’m Ann Ukyou,” Ann said.

“I’m aware...” Soukichi replied.

It would be harder to find someone at their school who didn’t know her by now.

“This isn’t exactly our first time meeting,” Soukichi continued

“Hah? What ya talkin’ about? I ain’t ever talked to ya until now,” Ann exclaimed, confused.

“Nope, we met last year during the culture festival. Remember? We talked for a bit, and I told you my name...”

The more that Soukichi attempted to get her to recall their previous meeting, the more humiliating it was for him. However, since he pretty much expected people to forget he existed by now, this sort of interaction was far from enough to send Soukichi into a spiral of depression.

...Except that was all a lie. The mere reality that he failed to stick in other people's minds to the point of forgetting about him was very much depressing to him.

"Oh! Hang on, I think I 'member," Ann punched one of her open palms, showing she had finally recalled their interaction.

"Yeah, dat was you. Last year during the culture festival, someone came and asked me a quest'n. I remember thinking about how some'a these first years ain't got a clue what they doing. Sorry 'bout that. Completely forgot about it 'till now," Ann then apologized to Soukichi, having regained her usual composure.

Her apology couldn't exactly be considered polite, but Soukichi wasn't one to mind the smaller details. She had a point, after all; he had been wandering about the festival without any clear goal in mind most of the time. Because of that, Soukichi felt he had no right to complain about her albeit harsh first impression of him.

Ann then began to speak again, as though trying to refocus the conversation.

"That aside, Kuroya. I wanted to ask ya sumthin'... Is Shimokura... seein' anyone right now?"

"..."

Ann now came across as very innocent and meek, which was a far cry from her usual demeanor. Could this be what they call... a maiden in love?

"He... isn't right now, no," Soukichi responded.

Tokiya had recently separated from the girl he had been seeing, so suffice it to say he was likely single at the moment. Actually, it'd be more accurate to say he isn't in a long-term relationship right now, but he was no doubt spending his nights fooling around with a large number of different girls. Soukichi didn't feel it necessary to let Ann know about that, though.

“I-I see.”

Ann’s face suddenly burst into a radiant smile.

She really wears her heart on her sleeve...

“Haha... I see, nice. He ain’t got a girlfriend right now. I’m surprised, because he’s just such a stu—I mean, he got the looks of a guy who don’t stay single fer long, y’know? So he ain’t seeing no-one, huh...?” Ann said, her face full of glee.

“...Does that mean you’re interested in Tokiya?” Soukichi finally asked.

He’d only do so as a formality, due to it already being quite apparent from Ann’s body language, facial expressions, and persistence. But it was still in good taste to confirm the fact before probing the subject any further. Or, at least, that’s what he’d intended to do...

“Wh-What?! W-Whattaya talkin’ about?!” Ann shouted. Her face was flushed red. Clearly Soukichi’s question had caught her off-guard, flustering her.

“H-How stupid are ya!? D-Dumbass! Of course I’m not! No chance in hell! Keep spreading fake rumors like that! See if I don’t kill you!”

After she’d finished rattling off many expletives and threats in a trill voice, Ann finally began to catch her breath. She then began to look around to check if anybody overheard them or was in the room with them, despite she herself having booked a private room for two. Once she’d done that, Ann then asked in a voice that was bound to trail off at any moment, while hiding her face, “...H-How’d ya figure it out?”

...Holy shit, she’s so adorable right now!

Her current disposition contrasting so greatly with her normal self only accentuated that impression. In fact, if Kasumi and Soukichi had never crossed paths, he’d likely have fallen head over heels for Ann just now.

“Well, I more or less made an educated guess based on the evidence,” Soukichi explained.

“Legit...? Tch. All you book reader types are just built different. You guys got good readin’ comprehension and can, like, sense how people feel or somethin’. Your circle ain’t called the ‘literature circle’ for nothin’, I guess.”

See... the thing is I'm pretty sure literally anyone in the world could've connected the dots, irrespective of whether or not they read a lot. I'm not gonna lie, I'm very confused about where this positive stereotype about bookworms came from.

"Sigh... Yeah, you're right. I like Shimokura... Well, I mean, I guess I don't really *like* like him. I just, ya know, kinda wanna know what's up wit' him. Yeah," Ann explained.

She must really have a thing for him if he's going so far as to use the tried-and-true method of approaching me, Tokiya's friend and fellow underclassman, before moving onto her true objective.

"I get it now... How do you two know each other, anyways?" Soukichi asked.

For one, Ann and Tokiya were in different grades, and Tokiya had never mentioned knowing Ann at all. Thus, Soukichi was curious about what led to Ann gaining an "interest" in his friend.

"Was there some sort of big, life-changing moment involved?"

"L-Life-changing moment...? Y-You dummy. It's got nothin' to do with ya," Ann said in a raised voice, trying to hide her embarrassment.

Whoops.

It appeared Soukichi had pushed things too far and made her uncomfortable. This was practically their first time ever having a serious conversation, in the end. Ann could hardly be blamed for not wanting to reveal such private information to someone she'd just met.

"I understand. I won't pry any further," Soukichi backed off.

"Good," Ann spat out.

"Okay."

"..."

"..."

"...It all started about a week ago," Ann said.

Hold on. After all that, you're still gonna tell me about it? That's all it took?

Were you seriously that desperate to spill the beans about your amazing experience to someone? Crap... This girl is cuter than I could have ever imagined.



“Uh... So to sum up, your ex-boyfriend was pestering you in public and trying to force you guys to get back together. Then Tokiya, who just happened to be passing by at that moment, swooped in and helped you out?” Soukichi, after having heard Ann’s recounting of events, asked, before receiving a nod from Ann that indicated he’d pretty much gotten the gist of it.

“Wow... Wouldn’t expect anythin’ less from a book reader. Ya got a way with words. Questions like ‘summarize the following within X words’ must be like breathin’ to ya or sumthin’,” Ann complimented.

She had probably meant well when she said that, but Soukichi couldn’t help but feel as though she was making fun of him. Ann’s falsely positive views on book readers were truly something to be beholden. It was like to her, book readers were some type of godlike beings that descended to Earth to impart their extensive wisdom. Plus, everything in her story was easy to follow and even cliché. It wouldn’t exactly be hard for the average person to narrow it down to the basic plot developments.

“...”

Soukichi might have summarized it a little too concisely, however. Let us delve into the specific details of Ann’s romantic encounter...

Ann’s ex-boyfriend had recently been stalking her a lot and even pestering her about getting back with him. In short, he was being an utter nuisance and a creep. Coincidentally, this guy had been the same person that Kasumi had told him about earlier today: the ex-boyfriend that went to a mixer because he didn’t believe it counted as cheating, ended up angering Ann, and then got broken up with soon after.

Several days later, he’d apparently began asking Ann about possibly patching things up. At that point, though, Ann had already moved on from him, and so she ignored his calls and blocked him online. Yet despite all that, he still hadn’t gotten the message. He then made a habit of stalking Ann’s social media

accounts to figure out where she was at all times in order to get there before she arrived to confront her.

Naturally, Ann was incredibly pissed at this. The two of them got into a fiery argument right there in the middle of the street that only continued to escalate, and just as Ann's ex-boyfriend was about to resort to violence...

"Woah, hold your horses there, dude."

...Tokiya, who happened to be walking by at the time, grabbed his arm.

"I'm not exactly the type to stick my nose in other people's business, but I'm not just gonna stand around and let some asshole hit a girl right in front of me." All of Ann's ex-boyfriend's hostility naturally became directed toward him at that moment, but suddenly...

"Hm? Tokiya, you about to fight this guy?"

"Ooooh. Sounds fun. Let me get in on this."

Several of Tokiya's friends showed up and were itching to get involved. They all had an air of intimidation about them, what with their baggy clothing and various jangling accessories. Now under tremendous pressure and at a disadvantage, Ann's ex-boyfriend silently slunked away from the scene, his face full of frustration.

"*Tch*. Lame. Now people are gonna think he screwed off because we weren't fighting fair," Tokiya grumbled, then turned his attention to Ann. "Hey, you. You're a third year, yeah? Ukyou... was it?"

"Yep... And who are you?" Ann asked.

"Shimokura, second year," Tokiya responded.

"*Urgh*... Mind your own business next time. I don't recall askin' for help."

"True, true. Apologies, I should've stayed out of it. Was that guy, like, your boyfriend?"

"N-No! I mean, he's my ex-boyfriend. Ex! We're totally through now, but he won't quit botherin' me."

"I see," Tokiya responded flippantly. "You should get better taste in men,

then. You're more than cute enough. You gotta find a man that fits you."

And with those parting words, Tokiya left the scene accompanied by his friends. Thus concludes the story.

Damnnnn... Tokiya might be too cool for his own good. Did somebody create him to be the perfect romcom protagonist? Or maybe a fan-favorite love interest from a shoujo manga? The rugged blunt type who is secretly kind at heart...

"Shimokura was hangin' around some pretty sketchy types, though. Wonder what he was doing with 'em?" Ann pondered.

"Oh, those were probably just people from the hip-hop club that Tokiya goes to often. They might look pretty scary at first glance, but the truth is they're mostly normal office workers. Tokiya isn't actually hanging out with legitimate gangsters or anything like that."

At least, that was what Soukichi had heard. He'd not even once interacted with them, nor did he particularly care to, due to having zero confidence in his ability to fit in with a group of adult hip-hop enthusiasts.

"...Ya really do know a lot about Shimokura."

"We are friends, after all."

Ann sent Soukichi a gaze full of envy before suddenly sidling over toward him. She then claps her hands together like she's praying to some deity and starts begging to me.

"Kuroya! Please help me get closer to Shimokura! I beg'a you!"

"...Huh?"

"C'mon! You can do that, can't ya? Help me out here!"

"W-What?"

Soukichi was simply dumbfounded by Ann's serious expression at that moment. He figured he only had to let her know about Tokiya's availability; he didn't expect her to demand more from him after that.

Ugh... This is turning out to be a major pain in the ass. I'd really rather not get

involved in someone else's love life. Soukichi thought to himself.

"Uh... Sorry. That's gonna be... hard to do," Soukichi attempted to escape the situation.

"C'mon, don't go givin' me that excuse," Ann replied.

"I know pretty much nothing about romance..." Soukichi continued

"Ya think I can't tell just by lookin' at you? I don't care about that, though! I really need your help here!" Ann begged.

"..."

Seriously, you can apparently tell that just by looking at me? Being a little too blunt there, aren't we? I mean, she's not exactly wrong, but there are still certain things you shouldn't say out loud!

Ann was supposedly coming to him asking for help, yet Soukichi couldn't help but feel that he was being insulted at the same time.

"It'll be fine! Ya read a lot of books, don't cha? You got this!" Ann exclaimed.

Is someone ever going to explain to me why she puts book readers on such a high pedestal?!

If it were possible to become some sort of love guru just from reading a lot of books, life would be much simpler overall for everyone.

"I doubt it'll be that tough, anyway. After all, hehehe, I figure I've got a pretty good shot with him," Ann said with the tone of a maiden enraptured with love.

"That Shimokura told me to 'find a man that fits you' when he was leaving back then! I'm willing to bet he was hittin' on me when he said that, right? He probably meant 'a man like me'! Guaranteed he likes me too!"

You're probably overthinking it.

Soukichi was convinced that Ann was reading too far into things. When taking tests nowadays, the answer is typically written within the text itself, with no need to glean anything else deeper. Letting your imagination run wild and responding with an answer that doesn't directly address the literal wording typically leads you astray.

“Please, Kuroya! This is the only thing I’ll ever ask of you!” Ann continued to beg.

“You’re sounding a lot like an elementary schooler right now...” Soukichi quipped.

“You know my darkest secret, and I can’t promise that you’ll leave this room alive if you turn me down,” Ann began resorting to threats.

“Now you’re part of an evil organization?”

You went and revealed your secret to me all on your own, which, mind you, I had no interest in knowing to begin with.

“Sigh...” Soukichi eventually acquiesced. “I can’t promise you it’ll work.”

“Hm?!”

“As I mentioned earlier, I’m not really built for things like this. I know zilch about romance, and I can’t guarantee that me helping you will lead to anything positive. I can’t take responsibility if anything goes wrong, alright?” Soukichi explained, putting emphasis on these statements in particular.

“If you still want me to help you in spite of all that, then fine. I’ll lend you a hand,” Soukichi concluded.

Soukichi felt he had no choice but to agree. In fact, he’d begun thinking that it’d be more irritating to turn her down. However, most importantly, Ann was still Shiramori’s friend, and a good boyfriend wouldn’t dare ignore requests from his girlfriend’s friends. Probably.

“Awesome!! Thanks, Kuroya! I owe you one!” Ann shouts.

With a beaming smile, Ann clasped Soukichi’s hands as she wholeheartedly thanked him.

Oh man, our hands just touched. This... doesn’t count as cheating, right? I mean, there aren’t any romantic feelings between us.

“Um, I’m not joking. I really don’t think I’ll be of any use. You really shouldn’t expect much from me.”

“I know, I know. I won’t put too much pressure on you. This is, you know, one

of those things, y'know? Somethin' about a horse or something?"

"If you're going to shoot a general, shoot his horse first?"

"Yeah that! Book readers really are built different, man!"

Again with the bias toward...?

"Whew... Thank goodness. You know, when you discovered that I liked him, I thought I was going to have to beat you so bad you'd lose your memories. Having you on my side is much better!"

Okay, this girl is downright scary. Was my life about to end just like that? Was I well on my way to a bad ending if I'd made the wrong decision?

"Well anyways, Kuroya. Gimme your phone number," Ann said.

Ann possessed the special ability of socialites to ask for phone numbers as if it wasn't a big deal. He didn't see any reason to not do so, so Soukichi took out his phone and exchanged numbers with Ann. A few hours ago, Soukichi had made a big deal over how Kasumi was the only female contact on his phone as a reason why he could never cheat. The day had yet to even end, and here he was with a new woman in his contact list.

"All right, we still got some time left. Might as well get in a few songs since we're already here. Feel free to hop in whenever you wanna, Kuroya."

After making that terrifying proposal, Ann began fidgeting around with the karaoke remote, before, as if having suddenly remembered something, beginning to talk again.

"Oh, right. Kuroya. Don't tell anyone else 'bout today. I haven't told anyone else but ya that I like Shimokura yet."

"I know..." Soukichi replies.

"Best make that a promise, got it? No blabbing to Kasumi about this either."

Soukichi could only nod in affirmation.



"Hmm, I see..." Kasumi said on the other end of the phone.

After having returned home and eaten dinner, Soukichi called Kasumi on the

phone and reported the unusual event that had taken place after school.

“So Ann has a crush on Shimokura. I would’ve never guessed! Oh, wait, I see... I had a feeling that she was constantly glancing your way that one time the three of us went to the cafeteria. Who would’ve guessed that it was Shimokura she was looking at,” Kasumi rambled.

“Tokiya, without actually intending to, basically made himself look incredibly cool in front of her. I’m not that surprised that she now has a crush on him,” Soukichi said.

“And now you have to act as a sort of wingman for her, right? That sounds pretty tough.”

“Yeah. I’ll do what I can.”

“Ahaha! Yeah, you got this! Still, though, Kuroya...” Kasumi’s voice suddenly lowered in volume. “Are you sure it was okay to tell me about this?”

“...”

“Ann specifically told you not to, didn’t she? And by name with me, as well.”

Soukichi was most definitely in the wrong here. He’d broken the promise he made with Ann without stopping to consider his actions, as well as having revealed everything that occurred today to Kasumi. He hadn’t leaked her secret by accident or out of any compulsion—he’d chosen of his own free will to betray Ann’s trust.

“I mean, as long as you don’t say anything, she’ll never find out, and it’ll be like this never even happened in the first place. No harm, no foul, right?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s how people usually play off their terrible secret-keeping behavior.”

She was correct and had left Soukichi no means to refute her. He himself believed that what he just did was indeed quite wrong. That being said...

“I just really didn’t want to keep it hidden from you. I met another girl in secret. How could I ever hide that from you? Keeping this secret would have continued to eat away at me, and if I’m actually going to be helping Ann from now on, chances are I’ll be meeting her in secret more and more often. Not

telling you about any of that felt really wrong, as your boyfriend,” Soukichi clarified.

Ever since parting ways with Ann, Soukichi had all sorts of thoughts jumbling around in his mind. Every vision of the future he conjured up was unbelievably bleak. He could already tell that the path he was currently walking only led to his inevitable destruction.

Having a girl secretly request you to help with their romantic relationship leads to meeting with that girl in secret, which then leads to your girlfriend having suspicions. That then leads to not being able to tell her anything because you promised to keep it a secret. And from there, your girlfriend’s distrust grows, and finally: boom, conflict. Soukichi’s brain was wired in such a way that he more or less instantaneously came up with the worst-case scenario.

In the end, it was a question of priorities. Although he felt apologetic to Ann, Soukichi’s number one priority above all else was, without a doubt, Kasumi.

Unlike harem protagonists, Soukichi didn’t possess the type of capabilities to treat multiple women equally. He already spent his days in defeat, unable to express the affection he so desperately wanted toward his one lover. As such, he decided that he would dedicate his limited brain functionality for her and her alone. He was determined to at the very least not lose her, no matter what else might come at a cost to that.

“You really are too honest sometimes,” Kasumi said after a short pause, seeming to be both exasperated and pleased.

“Did you seriously think that I would doubt how genuine you are with me if you spent time with Ann? Am I really that narrow-minded to you?” Kasumi questioned.

“Th-That’s not the issue. The problem isn’t how you would react to it, but how I feel about it,” Soukichi explained.

“Hee-hee... Well. I guess bad timing also comes into play with that. After all, today just so happened to be the day that we spent a whole lotta time talking about cheating!” Kasumi joked.

That was also true. Immediately after having a lengthy discussion about

infidelity, Soukichi had gone to a karaoke bar with another girl, where he was then asked to help said girl with getting with another man. He couldn't deny that their recent conversation was having an adverse effect on him.

"I know that I should be really mad at you right now as Ann's friend, but I just don't have it in me! Hee-hee! You're so cute, Kuroya!" Kasumi exclaims in a bouncy voice. "No matter who you're with, you've always got me on your mind, huh?"

"..."

"Sheesh. What are you, into me or something?" Kasumi continued to tease.

"Ngh..." That had hit Soukichi particularly where it hurts.

Soukichi felt miserable right within his very soul. As for what he felt miserable about? Some part of him was enjoy how she was disparaging him at this very moment! How pathetic!

"S-So what if I do? Got a problem with that?"

"Hm.... Nope!" Kasumi responded, joyful.

"Okay! I get the situation. For now, until Ann tells me something, I'll pretend to not know what's going on. Take good care of Ann, Kuroya," Kasumi said.

"I'll try," Soukichi replied.

"Come on! Put some more heart into it!" Kasumi shouted.

"I'll do as much as is appropriate."

"Hmm, I guess that's fine."

Soukichi thought that the conversation had more or less come to an end. However, the conversation suddenly took an unexpected turn.

"Karaoke, huh...?" Kasumi muttered, having suddenly remembered something. "I got distracted by talking about all of Ann's relationship stuff, but I distinctly recall you mentioning something about having fun with Ann at a karaoke bar somewhere in there."

"You could hardly call that having fun for me. She also dragged me there against my will, for one. Also, I didn't sing at all; only Ukyou did," Soukichi

explained.

“Still, that was the first time you went to a karaoke bar alone with a girl, right?” Kasumi asked.

“...Well, yeah.”

That was naturally his first experience doing anything remotely like that. Soukichi could count on his fingers the number of times he has even gone to a karaoke bar, anyhow.

“*Sigh*... I see Ann took your first time, then,” Kasumi said.

“I thought we already agreed that this didn’t count as cheating,” Soukichi replied.

“Obviously I don’t think you went so far as cheating on me. Doesn’t mean that there isn’t a part of me that still feels a little uncomfortable,” Kasumi clarified.

“A-Are you kidding me? Is there anything I can do to make up for it?” Soukichi panicked.

“There is one thing...”

Kasumi then proposed an idea to Soukichi in a tone that reminded him of an evil mastermind planning their latest scheme.

“How about we go on a date?”

Chapter Four

Uncharted Territory

We set the plaza in front of the train station as our meeting place; 10:30, their meeting time. Soukichi left home early so as to not be late under any circumstances. As a result, he arrived at the plaza at around 10:00 A.M, thirty minutes prior to what was agreed. After waiting for ten minutes, the person he was waiting for arrived at 10:10 on the dot. Her beauty was such that she stood out even amidst the throng of people. She was wearing an off the shoulder top and a dark skirt, and she gave off a cool mature sense more usually seen in mature women.

Upon spotting Soukichi, the girl waved her hand and jogged toward him.

“You’re here early, Kuroya. We’ve still got twenty minutes until we’re supposed to be here. How long have you been waiting for?” Kasumi asked.

“Not that long. Maybe around ten minutes,” Soukichi replied.

“Huh?! That’s so insanely early! Were you looking forward to our date that much?”

“No, I simply prefer to arrive early to all arranged meetings. It makes me feel like a loser if somebody arrives before me.”

“Hahaha! That is so like you,” Kasumi laughed.

That sense of superiority that came from being the first to show up felt more like some kind of odd mental quirk born of insecurity than something to be proud of. Soukichi had mixed feelings about Kasumi saying that such an action was fitting for him, but was simultaneously happy to see her laughing and smiling.

“...Hmm?”

Kasumi began examining Soukichi from head to toe.

“Wh-What is it?” Soukichi asked, confused.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you in something other than a uniform... I’m

digging it,” Kasumi complimented.

“Thanks...”

“You’ve got a surprisingly good fashion sense, Kuroya. I kinda figured you didn’t really care much about clothing, to be honest.”

“I really don’t, and my fashion sense isn’t that great. It’s just that fast fashion is in style in our modern era, that’s all. Buying more normal and thrifty clothing will more or less result in a decent appearance, and that’s a definitively great boon to the introverts of the world,” Soukichi began to ramble.

The rise of fast fashion made the lives of people like Soukichi who “have no interest in fashion, but also don’t want to look like garbage while out in public,” and “want to blend into the background,” significantly easier.

In the past, it wasn’t uncommon for people who bought all their clothes from UNIQLO or GU to get laughed at, but nowadays, seeing those sorts of brands was far from uncommon.

Although Soukichi claimed to have no interest in fashion, he nevertheless put in the effort to understand the baseline of what looks good.

After all, today was the day of his long-awaited date with his girlfriend, and he wasn’t eager to have passersby judging Kasumi because of his lack of effort. He didn’t mind others belittling him internally, but he would rather die than have Kasumi suffer that same fate.

“Hmm.”

Kasumi suddenly moved closer to Soukichi. She then opened her arms wide and puffed out her chest, as if to show off her attire for today.

“...What?” Soukichi asked.

“How do I look?” Kasumi asked in a daring tone.

Soukichi knew what she wanted to say even without her saying it, because it was written on her face: “Now it’s your turn.”

“...Nice clothes today,” Soukichi said.

“Just the clothes?” Kasumi prodded.

“...Your fashion sense is incredible.”

“And that means...?”

“...It suits you really well, and you look unbelievably cute!” Soukichi shouted, wanting for her to stop.

“Hehe. Thank you,” Kasumi chirped with a satisfied look on her face. “I’m glad you like it. I put a lot into coming up with today’s outfit, just for you.”

“L-Let’s just get moving. There’s no point in us standing around here,” Soukichi said in an attempt to change the topic

Today’s date location was a karaoke bar. Kasumi didn’t come across as very happy about him going with a different girl to one before her, and that led to where they are currently.



“You’re right. Let’s go,” Kasumi coincided.

Kasumi began walking, but not in the direction of the karaoke bar in front of the station. It was clear she was heading toward the train station itself.

“W-Wait, Shiramori? Where are you going? The karaoke bar is over there,” Soukichi asked.

“Oh, did I forget to mention that? We’re going to a different karaoke bar today,” Kasumi replied

“W-Why?” Soukichi remained puzzled.

“A lot of people from our school use that one. There’s a pretty high chance we’ll end up running into somebody, especially with it being the weekend,” Kasumi clarified.

“...If you were really so worried about that, then why did we meet up here? Shouldn’t we have met up at a less conspicuous location?”

“Well, maybe. But since we’re already going out today, I figured we’d pick a place a decent ways away. Today’s our first real date, after all.”

Soukichi could only nod in the wake of her dazzling smile. Soukichi had a feeling that their first date wasn’t going to be something as simple as heading to a karaoke bar. All of that time and effort he’d spent meticulously planning the date ahead might have been wasted now, but he still found himself excited for the day to come.

“Oh yeah,” Kasumi continued as they passed through the ticket gates. “What did you tell your folks when you left the house today?”

“I said I’d be hanging out with a friend,” Soukichi replied.

“Oh. So you’re hiding what we’re doing, then?” Kasumi asked.

“I felt like telling them the truth would only cause more problems than it’d solve,” Soukichi explained himself.

“I see... And they didn’t suspect anything was going on?”

“I don’t think my mom did, at least. She was actually pretty happy to hear that, in fact. She was talking about how I barely ever hung out with my friends,

so this was nice to see.”

“Ahaha! Got it. Then you don’t hang out with Tokiya over the weekend or anything like that?”

“We’re only school friends,” Soukichi said.

“Your dynamic is pretty unique, I have to admit,” Kasumi quipped.

“My elder sister seemed a little suspicious. Her exact words were, ‘Wait, *you’re* hanging out with somebody?’”

“You saying that really did get a lot of interesting reactions, huh?”

“What about you, Shiramori? What’d you tell your parents?”

“I had the same excuse.”

“How did they respond?”

“They had the usual responses to that, so I don’t think they caught on to anything. My father never really gets involved in my private life anyway.”

“...I see,” Soukichi said.

The two engaged in idle chatter as they made their way toward their platform door. The two were planning to travel to Sendai on one of the trains on Kasumi’s recommendation.

“Do you ever visit Sendai, Kuroya?” Kasumi asked.

“I’ve been there once for a field trip during middle school. What about you?” Soukichi replied.

“I go there every now and then, I guess. Sometimes with friends, sometimes with my father,” Kasumi answered.

The train arrived soon after they reached their platform. The doors opened, and the two boarded for their destination. Fortunately for them, the train wasn’t too packed; they appeared to have picked the perfect time of day to leave for their date.

“Oh, nice! We should be able to get a seat now,” Kasumi practically cheered.

“Mhm...” Soukichi responded.

“Wait, why do you sound disappointed by that?” Kasumi asked.

“I’m not...”

Soukichi feigned ignorance to her question. There was no way he could reveal to her that he was actually hoping for it to be crowded, and he certainly wasn’t hoping for one of those cliché scenes you’d tend to see in romantic comedies where the protagonist and heroine get on board a crowded train and are forced into close proximity whether they want to or not.

“W-Wow, the train is packed today.”

“It really is. Whoa, Shiramori, watch out. Get over here with me.”

“Huh? Oh, Okay... Thanks.”

“...!”

“Ah! A-Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I just got a little nudge from behind, that’s all.”

“...Hey, Kuroya. You can come a little closer if you want.”

“What? B-But if I do...”

“I don’t mind.”

“Shiramori...!”

Yes, he’d hoped for something exactly like that! A scene like that definitely could have taken place. If only the opportunity presented itself. Unfortunately for Soukichi, most romantic comedy manga are set in the Kantou region, which is much different from the area where they lived. You were unlikely to experience trains packed anywhere near as tight as that even at rush hour.

“Let’s sit over there,” Kasumi indicated.

The two headed over to two empty seats and sat down next to each other. After a brief pause, the train eventually began moving, with the view from the window across from them increasing in acceleration along with it.

“Have you thought about what we’ll be doing once we get there?” Soukichi asked.

“Hm... Not really. Maybe just a little bit of wandering about should be nice,” Kasumi replied.

“Wandering around...?” Soukichi trailed off.

Damn...

Due to it being their first date, Soukichi was hoping to take the lead, but he had already wandered into uncharted territory. He felt it was virtually impossible to regain that initiative now, as shameful as it was to admit.

“...Hey, Kuroya,” Kasumi called out to Soukichi, who had been awash in his own shame. She spoke in a low volume, but she was so close to his ear that he could hear it clearly.

“Were you bummed out that there wasn’t a pile of people on the train?” Kasumi continued.

“Huh?” Her question had surprised Soukichi.

“Were you hoping for that, so we would have to be pressed against each other?” Kasumi further teased.

“__”

What?! How does she know?! There’s a limit to how perceptive you can be!

“Just as I suspected.” The way Soukichi reacted made the answer clear as day. Flashing a smile of understanding, Kasumi continued.

“So that’s how it is. My precious Kuroya was really hoping to be body-on-body with me. Very interesting,” Kasumi cooed.

“N-No, I wasn’t. And please don’t speak for me,” Soukichi said, flustered.

“Heeheehee!”

No matter how desperately Soukichi tried to explain himself, Kasumi paid him no heed. Soukichi had no choice but to endure the humiliation of his most inner thoughts being exposed to the world.

“You’re such a silly guy, Kuroya,” Kasumi said.

“Oh, quiet down. This is how all men are. As long as the opportunity presents itself, they’ll fantasize about any opportunities to get close and personal with

the opposite sex,” Soukichi attempted to explain himself.

“That’s not what I meant. I’m trying to say you’re not straight-forward enough,” Kasumi clarified.

Straight-forward?

Before Soukichi had a chance to ask her what she meant by that, though, Kasumi scooted closer to him; so close, in fact, that their butts were almost making contact with one another. Kasumi’s sudden movement quickly caused Soukichi’s heart to race, but this was merely the beginning of the figurative combo chain.

In one fluid motion, Kasumi had ensnared his hand, which had been placed on his lap, and then shoved into the gap between them. Before Soukichi had even realized what was going on, his fingers were now intertwined with Kasumi’s.

“Eh? Huh?” Soukichi was perplexed.

“Hehe!”

Kasumi gazed at Soukichi, her enjoyment apparent on her face; meanwhile, he just sat there in a daze after being on the receiving end of that devastating attack.

“We can get up close and personal whenever you want, Kuroya,” Kasumi said with a slightly flushed face. Her voice was both chiding and tempting at the same time.

“I mean, we’re already dating for one. There’s no need for any excuses for us to do a little touching,” Kasumi continued.

“~~!”

Kasumi’s words, given to him in such close proximity, were almost enough to make Soukichi’s head explode.

“W-We can’t do this! W-We have no idea who might be watching us right now!” Soukichi exclaimed, flustered.

“You’re right... I guess we’ll have to be a little sneakier about it, then,” Kasumi whispered in a bewitching voice, before leaning even closer against Soukichi. Their hands remained clasped together as he sunk deeper into the gap between

them. Soukichi could vividly feel Kasumi's thigh weighing against the back of his hand, and it was more than enough to cause his mind to short circuit.

The only thing on his mind now was the girl next to him.

"Still worried about getting found out?" Kasumi asked.

"...No," Soukichi replied after some hesitation.

He knew he would most definitely lose all control of himself if this carried on any further. This was still only the first phase of their date. They hadn't even arrived at their destination yet, and yet Soukichi was on the verge of a mental breakdown.



Once they'd gotten off the train at Sendai, after all of Kasumi's proclamations, they didn't even go to the karaoke bar in front of the station at first.

"We should go check out some other places while we're here," Kasumi proposed.

The first place they went to was a clothing store inside the station. The floor was filled with all kinds of ladies' fashion products. Kasumi, confidently moved through the store, seemingly being second nature to her. In contrast, Soukichi was left feeling like an alien that'd crash-landed on a foreign planet.

"Oh! This is so adorable!" Kasumi squealed.

She then grabbed onto one of the hats in the store and put it on.

"What do you think, Kuroya?" Kasumi asked.

"It looks fine...?" Soukichi replied.

"Mmm... Not sure I like how wishy-washy that was," Kasumi said with a hint of dissatisfaction, before putting the hat back on the counter.

I definitely agree with you; it was adorable. You looked amazing in it, but... I wouldn't truly be me if I were able to casually compliment you like that!

"So... can I please just wait outside?" Soukichi attempted to escape his current predicament.

"Huh? Why?" Kasumi replied.

“Well, uh... I just don’t really feel like I fit in here,” Soukichi explained.

The store was filled with trendy clothes and other sorts of popular goods. An English song he wasn’t aware of was playing through the speakers, and for whatever reason, a pleasant fragrance was filling the store. It was like the entire store was the pure embodiment of fashion itself, and the introverted cells that made up Soukichi’s body were screaming at him to get out of there.

“I can’t help but feel like the people here are shooting suspicious glances my way and wondering what I’m even doing here...” Soukichi said.

“You’re being too self conscious,” Kasumi assuaged with a giggle. “Just bear with it for a while, okay? I won’t be long.”

“Okay...”

“And after that, we’ll go nab you some clothes. This place actually has quite the men’s selection!” Kasumi exclaimed.

“You don’t need to worry about that. I’m not planning on spending any money on things like that,” Soukichi replied.

“Are you sure? You should really think more about what you wear...”

“What’s the point for me in doing that? Sure, it’s probably fun for people like you to thoroughly plan out all your outfits, and all that, but I...”

“People like me?”

“You know, people who are cute and have good figures like you. Then you have m—”

Wait, hang on... What was that?

“...Ahaha!” A dumbfounded expression crossed Kasumi’s face for a moment, before being replaced by an awkward smile and a laugh. “Well, that is a little embarrassing to hear, but I’m glad you think so highly of me.”

“W-Wait, no! That was just a... figure of speech, yeah. I just ended up blurting what was on my mind. I wasn’t thinking straight—er, I mean...” Soukichi stumbled immensely over his words.

Kasumi maintained her wry smile at Soukichi, who only continued to dig his

own grave.

“To be honest, the reason I came here is because I wanted for you to compliment me,” Kasumi confessed.

“W-What?” Soukichi was stunned.

“Yeah. I was thinking that maybe trying on a bunch of stylish clothes would get even a boy who can’t express his emotions properly like you to be honest. I was even hoping you might call me cute, like you did just now,” Kasumi continued. “But I didn’t expect that you would get going with the praise without me having to do anything. Believe me, I am happy, but it feels... a little anti-climactic? Still, that was a pretty good sneak attack on your part.”

“...”

It appeared that Soukichi’s self implosion had resulted in Kasumi’s plan misfiring. Their situation was comparable to that of a hunter who had put in a significant amount of effort to lay a trap to capture their prey, only for their prey to trip over their own feet and mortally wound themselves only a few feet from their meticulous work. A plethora of feelings coursed throughout Soukichi’s mind, mainly consisting of embarrassment and a want to apologize.

Once they’d finished shopping, they went to get ice cream. The ice cream parlor was located in the underground floor of the train station. Soukichi wasn’t really familiar with the place, but apparently, it was a fairly renowned store where the servers would sing a few melodies while making your ice cream for you.

“Why do they go to the trouble, by the way?” Soukichi asked.

“Who knows? Maybe it makes the ice cream taste better?” Kasumi pondered.

“Hmm... I guess it’s comparable to that chant that they do at maid cafes,” Soukichi said.

“It looks like a lot of fun is all I know. I might just try getting a job here when I’m in college,” Kasumi delighted.

“Not even a fortune would get me to work here.”

The two finished ordering with the sense of their vastly differing personalities

made apparent, and the server crooned in a cheerful voice while deftly making their ice cream. Kasumi picked strawberry, while Soukichi picked chocolate. After they'd received what they'd ordered, they made their way toward a few empty seats.

"Nice going, Kuroya. What a perceptive guy you are," Kasumi offered up a surprise compliment.

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Soukichi asked.

"You made sure to get a different flavor than me, didn't you?"

Kasumi scooped out a spoonful of ice cream and ate it. She then dug up a second spoonful and held it out to Soukichi.

"Well? You can't not share ice cream!"

"...!"

Soukichi finally understood what Kasumi meant by that, and that was...

"You're such a sly dog, Kuroya, going about all that just so you could feed me," Kasumi teased.

"That isn't what happened. I got the flavor I wanted, and there's nothing more to it," Soukichi said.

"Okay, if you insist. Now let's get to sharing. I'm really dying for some of that chocolate creamy goodness," Kasumi said gleefully.

"...I'm gonna go ask for another spoon," Soukichi attempted to escape from the impending situation.

"No, you can't be so wasteful! We have to minimize our use of plastic for the sake of the environment," Kasumi proclaimed with an impish smile. It was clear that the environment was the last thing on her mind in saying that.

"What's the problem, Kuroya? Are you really still that self-conscious about indirect kisses? You're already a high schooler!"

"O-Of course not. I just... don't think we should be doing stuff like that in public."

To tell the truth, Soukichi's mind was absolutely consumed by the thought of

that, and as a result, his eyes gravitated toward her lips.

Dammit, Kasumi... You made such a show out of eating that ice cream on purpose!

“Open wide, Kuroya!” Kasumi presented a new spoon of ice cream before Soukichi even had a chance to regain his bearings. “Come on, Kuroya. No dilly-dallying!”

“But...” Soukichi trailed off.

“Oh no! It’s starting to drip!” Kasumi yelled out.

“...!”

Soukichi, upon seeing that her ice cream was about to go to waste, instinctively moved his face closer and ate it with a chomp.

“Well, look at that! You ate it, after all!” Kasumi exclaimed.

“You thought I wouldn’t...? You’re the one that offered it,” Soukichi said.

“Haha! True, true! So how did it taste?”

“Pretty good.”

“Was it because I fed it to you?”

“I’ve gotta say, the company really did a good job with this.”

“Hee hee... Why can’t you ever be honest?”

Kasumi appeared quite satisfied by that outcome. Right as Soukichi began to relax, however, Kasumi carried on with her assault.

“Okay, now it’s your turn.”

“...Huh?” Soukichi said, surprised.

“What do you mean, ‘huh?!’ It wouldn’t be right for you to be the only one eating! Gimme some ice cream!” Kasumi wailed exaggeratedly.

“O-Okay, have a bite then. I haven’t touched mine y—”

“No thanks,” Kasumi interjected. She then jutted out her jaw and opened her mouth as wide as can be

“Ish Cweem Pweez.”

“...!”

Kasumi’s horrible pronunciation caused Soukichi’s mind to fall into a frenzy.

What the hell?

Kasumi continued to sit there, vulnerable and waiting for Soukichi to take action.

Those glossy lips of hers, and the tongue pointing outward on top of that. This might just be my dirty mind talking, but this scene feels rather... inappropriate.

“...Here you go,” Soukichi stretched out his spoon, and Kasumi bit into the massive scoop.

“Mmm... This one’s also pretty tasty,” Kasumi commented. “That’s good to hear...” Soukichi replied.

“Was it maybe because you fed it to me?”

“...I’ve gotta say, the company really did a good job with this.”

Soukichi averted his eyes from the smirking expression of Kasumi and took another scoop of his ice cream.

As soon as they finished with their ice cream, they ended up going to the large book store at the station next.

Phew, finally a chance to relax.

Soukichi had felt so incredibly out of his depth the entire day, but he was confident that the bookstore would be the perfect place for him at this moment. He’d never been to a bookstore at a train station before, but he was assured in his belief that it’d be a much more comfortable environment than the previous two establishments they’d gone to.

“I bet most people would find us strange for going to a bookstore of all places while on a day out,” Soukichi remarked.

“You’re right about that. They’d probably make some ignorant comment like ‘They all sell the same books. Why bother?’” Kasumi agreed with him.

“That’s not the point, though.”

“Indeed.”

The two of them understood better than just about anybody that the point of going to different bookstores isn't because they sell different books. Each bookstore was inherently different in that depending on your mood, the book you purchase will differ. The layout of the store, made through intensive research on customer behavior; the promotional videos created to rouse certain emotional responses. Each store was a manifestation of the hard work of the storekeeper, and that's not to mention how you could find all sorts of new books that you wouldn't have ever come across online.

Of course, that wasn't to say that online stores are inferior by any means. Soukichi made good use of both. Book stores simply had their own merits and charms that the other alternative didn't. An additional benefit from buying at a new book store was that you could acquire new book covers and bookmarks on top of that. And when re-reading an old book and seeing that particular cover, you could reminisce about where and when you bought it, which added more flavors of enjoyment to your reading experience.

"Oh! I've seen this manga before. It's gotten really popular lately," Kasumi said upon seeing a book nearby.

"Yeah, it's apparently selling like hotcakes. I'm a fan of this author too, but to be honest, I liked his previous work more. Although it didn't sell many copies, it felt like he was genuinely expressing himself through it. This one here comes across more like the author adapted their style in order to get more sales," Soukichi rambled.

"Uh oh, here comes the hipster that praises the less-acknowledged stuff over the popular favorites," Kasumi joked.

"...I'll shut up now."

"Ahaha! I'm sorry about that! Please don't feel down about that."

The two engaged in cheerful banter as they walked through the store.

Mmm, yeah. Bookstores truly are the best.

Soukichi felt right at home here, unlike with other typical dating locations. However, his moment of bliss and comfort unfortunately didn't last long.

"Ah?!"

Kasumi suddenly let out a weird sound, which caught Soukichi off-guard.

“What’s up?”

“Uh, um... Ahaha.”

A befuddled expression appeared on her face for a fleeting moment, before she smiled in an attempt to pretend nothing was wrong.

“It’s just, well... I happened to see that book over there,” Kasumi answered and pointed at a certain bookshelf in the corner of the store.

The location didn’t stand out all that much, but since the covers on the books were in plain view of everybody, Soukichi immediately realized which book Kasumi was talking about.

“...?!”

Soukichi was stunned. The book that Kasumi was pointing at in an embarrassed manner... was none other than “Do you like Horny Cougars? Noriko’s Virgin Sex Lesson.”

“Ahaha... I did not expect to see that book in print,” Kasumi quipped with an awkward laugh. However, awkward couldn’t even begin to describe how Soukichi currently felt.

Why must you make me suffer so, Noriko, you beguiling temptress?! I don’t remember signing up for this course long-term!

“Yeah, you know... It’s one of those things, right? With how those more risque books are put out in the open instead of being relegated to the adult’s section. It isn’t really surprising to see it here...” Kasumi continued in a seeming attempt to avoid any more awkward silence.

She was correct. Those types of books tended to be sold out in the open, for some reason. Erotic books with pictures of real women and erotic manga magazines had strict regulations placed on them, yet erotic novels and light novels weren’t generally monitored as much. It wasn’t unusual for bookstores to have an erotic light novel sitting right next to an average light novel.

Mother...

If this were Soukichi’s usual bookstore, then he could have easily avoided

such a scenario from happening. But this was his first time here; he could never have known whereabouts the erotic novel section was, let alone accidentally enter it with his girlfriend.

“They must be selling pretty well to be put out on display like this,” Kasumi said.

Although Kasumi was a bit flustered at first, she’d completely regained her composure by now, and her typical teasing expression had returned alongside it.

“Wh-Who knows? Maybe they do,” Soukichi replied.

He purposefully spoke to her in a vague manner, as he knew full well what the answer was. The Noriko series had immense sales for an erotic novel, and it was already confirmed that there would be an OVA adaptation of it. The Noriko series was already on its third volume, which was fairly astonishing for an industry that regularly only pumps out one volume per series before cancellation.

“Are cougars really that popular among boys?” Kasumi inquired.

“W-What do you mean?” Soukichi replied, flustered.

“I mean, don’t you kind of get that impression? Not that I’m super familiar with the subject or anything, but I’ve heard that cougars are pretty popular in the adult industry...”

“W-Who knows?”

“A lot of people call me that, as well... What do boys see in cougars, anyway? Do they get off on the thrill of forbidden love, or the feeling of immorality like you see in soap operas?”

“That’s probably part of it, but to males, it’s much simpler than that. Cougars in adult works are almost always sexually frustrated, and that makes them really appealing to a male audience—”

Wait, hang on. What’s with the thorough exposition?! What in the world has come over me, man?! Why am I explaining my personal view on cougar porn to my girlfriend?! And on our date, too!

“Really now? Then again, I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised that you know so much about them,” Kasumi joked.

“...I’m not knowledgeable in the slightest. That’s just something I picked up at some point,” Soukichi attempted to brush it off.

“Hehehe... Man, you’re quite a handful, Kuroya,” Kasumi said with a bout of laughter before continuing. “Hey, Kuroya. What would you do if I married somebody else and became the real deal? Wouldn’t that then make you—”

She was obviously fooling around with him in exploring this hypothetical scenario. Soukichi very well understood that, and yet—

“—I don’t even want to think about it,” Soukichi quickly cut off that line of thought. “As I said before, these types of books are simply for entertainment purposes. They don’t accurately reflect what you want in reality a lot of the time. I’d rather die than have you marry someone else, Shiramori. I want you to marry m—”

Soukichi reflexively began chattering on and on before coming to his senses at the very last second.

Kasumi stared at Soukichi. Her bewilderment was clear, as well as her anticipation of what was to come. Those varying feelings assailed Soukichi with a piercing sense of humiliation.

“You want me to marry... who exactly?” Kasumi asked.

“Nothing! I didn’t say anything!” Soukichi yelled out in response and firmly averted his gaze from her. “...We should get going. There’s no point in carrying on that conversation in this embarrassing location.”

“What, why? C’mon! Finish your sentence!”

“I will not.”

Kasumi didn’t look all too satisfied by that, but Soukichi didn’t mind; his one aim at the moment was getting away.







After that, they went and enjoyed themselves at various other places within the station. Then at a little past four, they finally went to the karaoke bar.

“We’ve only got an around until we need to head back,” Kasumi said.

“That should be enough time, shouldn’t it?” Soukichi replied.

“Honestly, I can’t really say that big a fan of karaoke,” Kasumi confessed as the two rode down the escalator.

“W-Wait, really?!” That news came as a surprise to Soukichi.

“It’s not so bad when you go in a large group and listen to other people sing, but I don’t ever really feel like singing myself. What about you, Kuroya?”

“I don’t like karaoke either. Though you can probably tell that just by looking at me.”

“Ahaha. Why don’t we just skip that part, then? We’re not exactly gonna be enjoying ourselves.”

“...Why did we even come here in the first place today?”

Soukichi was confident that they were only going together out of Kasumi’s jealousy of him going with Ann before her.

“Why do you think we came?” Kasumi asked once they got off of the escalator, the tilt of her head reflecting her intrigue at his answer.

“Why I think we came...?” Soukichi mulled.

“Exactly. We came here to have a date,” Kasumi continued.

“...I’ve yet to respond.” Her interruption had taken him by surprise.

“It was written all over your face. ‘I’m so blessed to be able to go on a date with Kasumi!’”

“...If you can tell all that from my face, then that must mean you felt the same way, didn’t you?”

“Ahaha! You aren’t going to refute it, then?”

“I’m not one to stoop so low as to criticize how others interpret things.”

Soukichi's only option was to play it cool in an attempt to dodge the question, because she was right; he couldn't refute her. Her reading of him was so accurate that it left him feeling embarrassed and hesitant to lie.

"So what should we do now?" Soukichi asked.

"Hmm... There's still some time till our train home, so we might as well go check out the karaoke bar. We can still hang out there for a while even without us actually singing anything, and you can try out all those new clothes of yours," Kasumi replied.

And so the two of them ended up going to the karaoke bar. Thankfully for Soukichi, it appeared like he wasn't required to sing at all. Last night, he had been, in a way, training his vocal cords to the point of his folks yelling at him to stop. Therefore, he was slightly disappointed at not being able to show off his efforts, but he was more relieved by the outcome than anything. As they were leaving the station, Kasumi suddenly asked him something.

"Hey, Kuroya, did you by any chance practice singing last—?"

She had a perfect grasp on Soukichi, as though an esper capable of peeking into his mind. However, she paused right as she was about to conclude her sentence. That's not all, though; she also stopped moving entirely.

"Hm? What's wrong?" Soukichi asked, stopping along with her.

Kasumi didn't respond and only continued to stare at the entrance to the station. Next to the exit door were several benches, upon which a young girl was currently sitting. Her gaze, full of hesitation, was directed right at that very girl. She didn't seem to know what to do next, based on that very look.

"...Oh!"

The young girl eventually noticed the two of them. An unpleasant expression formed on her face for a moment, before she slowly got up off the bench and started walking in their direction.

"Long time no see, Kasumi," the girl bobbed her head after giving that rather cold greeting.

"Long time no see, Kazumi," Kasumi responded with a genial smile, the

hesitation now gone from her as if never there to begin with.

“Fancy running into you here.”

“I was quite surprised to see you myself.”

“Are you out on a shopping trip, too?”

“Something like that. I’m here with a friend from school.”

“I see... Wait, what?”

The girl, who had been so calm up until that moment, suddenly froze after looking at Soukichi. An awkward silence grew between the three, as Soukichi was also unsure of what to do.

“Um... Kasumi. Who is this?” the girl asked.

“An underclassman at my school,” Kasumi responded.

“You mean to say...?” the girl continued.

“Mmm, yeah. More or less.”

“More than friends, less than lovers?”

“...Wait, are you asking me? Please just leave me out of this,” Soukichi said.

Soukichi was truly hoping not to be burdened with answering that important a question.

“Hah... I see. Well, I can’t say I’m shocked, seeing as you’re already in your third year, Kasumi,” the girl said.

Surprise flickered across the girl’s face that’s soon followed by admiration, before finally returning to her base expression of seeming apathy.

“Kuroya, this is Kazumi Benikawa. She’s in her first year of middle school. Kazumi, this is Soukichi Kuroya. He’s a second year at the same school I go to,” Kasumi introduced the two “Ah... Nice to meet you. My name is Kuroya,” Soukichi nodded his head around, flustered as he gave his name. Kazumi might’ve been younger than him, but he still gave his introduction in a formal manner. That’s just how Soukichi was.

First year of middle school, huh?

Soukichi had guessed that she was younger and probably in middle school, but he hadn't expected her to still be in his first year. That meant that she was incredibly tall for her age. And mature. And... she seemed kind of similar to Kasumi.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Benikawa," Kazumi introduced herself calmly, before suddenly getting stuck on what to say next. "I'm Kasumi's, uh...?"

"I guess relative would be appropriate?" Kasumi offered Kazumi a life boat, or perhaps she'd simply preempted how she was going to respond.

"...Yeah. Relative. I'm Kasumi's relative," Kazumi said with an awkward nod *Something doesn't feel right...*

Soukichi had a strange sense of unease when listening to the two talk. It didn't feel antagonistic by any means; in fact the two of them seemed rather friendly, but there was still this bizarre feeling that'd been eating away at him. They had a unique sense of distance and a strainedness to their conversation.

"Did you come here alone, Kazumi?" Kasumi asked.

"Nope, I came with my mom," Kazumi replied.

"Oh, I figured as such," Kasumi said.

"She's currently in the restroom. I'm waiting for her to come out," Kazumi chimed in only a moment later. "She should be done soon. Do you want to see her?"

"No need," Kasumi answered almost immediately. "It's about time for us to leave. We have a train to catch soon."

Huh?

Soukichi whirled around to look at Kasumi. She seemed perfectly calm and composed in spite of her lie about when they'll be leaving, The only plans they had were to go to the karaoke bar, and even that was already deemed as virtually unnecessary to them.

"I'll be meeting with her next month, anyways. Tell her I said hello."

"...I see," Kazumi quietly nodded after saying that.

“Let’s get going, Kuroya,” Kasumi beckoned.

“Huh? A-Alright,” Soukichi replied, unsure of what to do.

“See you later, Kazumi. Bye-bye!”

Kasumi began gallantly walking away after giving her temporary farewells, and Soukichi soon followed suit once he’d given her a proper enough nod as a way of saying goodbye.

They left the train station and walked onward for a bit. They weren’t heading toward the karaoke bar, nor were they heading toward the ticket gates. Kasumi simply continued to move in a straight line, as though trying to run away from something.

“Shiramori...” Unable to stand the silence any longer, Soukichi opened his mouth to speak. “Um... Are you okay?”

“...”

Kasumi stopped right where she stood once he’d asked her that, then slowly turned around.

“Did I not... look okay back there?” Kasumi inquired with a wry smile. “Dang... I guess that must’ve thrown me off my game there. I usually would have handled the situation a little better.”

“...”

“Sorry for involving you in lying to her, Kuroya,” Kasumi apologized sincerely.

“I don’t care about that,” Soukichi said in response.

He realized that he might be crossing a line he never should at that very moment, yet that strange sense of unease he’d felt back there spurred him on in asking her.

“That girl, Benikawa... What’s your relationship with her?”

They didn’t appear to be mere relatives. Soukichi could sense that there was something much stronger tying them together, or perhaps something equally as strong keeping them apart.

“That part about her being my relative... was actually true. We are related by

blood, from a certain viewpoint. Kazumi is my little sister... from a different father,” Kasumi answered his question with ease, like revealing such a major aspect of her life was equivalent to giving her thoughts on the weather.

Chapter Five

Nostalgia

It was around half a year ago, as students like Soukichi and Kasumi were in the process of preparing for the upcoming cultural festival...

“I live in a single-father household.”

The two had been together in their clubroom, compiling a journal that their club would present, when Kasumi had dropped that very bombshell.

“Wait, what?” Soukichi had been left quite confused.

“Oh, don’t take that too seriously. My life hasn’t changed much because of it, and I still have routine visits with my mom. All that’s different is that we no longer live with each other,” Kasumi had replied in an unnaturally cheerful voice.

The two had been talking about when they’d begun their forays into the world of books. Soukichi’s recounting had been nothing special, but when it came to Kasumi’s turn, she’d started talking about her past without much prompt.

“When I was four, my parents ended up getting divorced, and my father received custody of me. I don’t know what happened, but it had to have been pretty serious for them to take that route. Chances are only the two of them really know.”

Kasumi continued to talk on without pausing once in a very detached manner, like she was regaling him with somebody else’s story rather than her own personal life. In hindsight, Kasumi must’ve been quite exhausted back then. Exhausted and tired. She’d been run ragged by last year’s culture festival, after all.

Part of the blame laid with those around her, but she herself wasn’t entirely faultless either. That very situation is most likely what led Kasumi to give Soukichi an abrupt narration of her life story. She came across as somebody complaining about their situation in life who wanted to make some sort of

excuses for how she became the way she currently was.

“Nowadays, it’s not so bad, since we’ve pretty much figured out how close we should be. But at the beginning, it was really hard on me. I love my mom, and I used to cry every night, begging to see her... My father must’ve had such a tough time dealing with me.”

Kasumi seemed apologetic, but Soukichi didn’t think there was any need for her to feel that way. It was normal for a child as young as her to want to be with their mom. It’s hard to imagine that they’d care much for the reasons behind why they couldn’t.

“My dad was practically dead on his feet in exhaustion back then. I could tell that much as a little girl. He must’ve had his hands full with the divorce and the custody battle, and with work and taking care of me on top of that? That sounds awful.”

Unsurprisingly, Kasumi wasn’t the only one who was dealt a difficult hand in life. Her father was seemingly also enduring a plethora of issues that weighed so heavily on him that even his own daughter could tell.

“It wasn’t long before I stopped crying. My father never got mad at me for it, despite how often it happened. He would get really sad and start apologizing a lot to me. That... made me feel so guilty inside.”

Though still just a little girl, she eventually did her part in alleviating her father’s burden; somewhat out of her own kindness, and somewhat out of her own guilt.

“And so I really tried my best to spend time away from him and become more independent overall. That’s when I got into reading books,” Kasumi said while patting the journal they were both currently working on.

“I started by reading picture books, but it wasn’t long before that well ran dry. I then began buying slightly longer books with higher reading difficulty and lived my youth reading them. My father would praise me all the time for being able to do that, too. He’d say things like, ‘Kasumi, you’re such a good girl,’ or, ‘You’re so much more grown-up than the other kids your age.’”

It wasn’t hard for Soukichi to accurately picture the scene. Being worked to

the bone between childcare and work, it must've been a blessing for him when his child suddenly grew into a habit such as reading over constantly asking him to play with her or to take her out somewhere. She really was the perfect child.

"It always made me so happy whenever he complimented me like that, but the biggest reward was that relieved expression of his. It gave me the impression that he liked me reading as often as I did, so I kept on going alone by myself, in my room..."

Kasumi had a smile on her face, but it looked more lonely than truly happy. This wasn't a story of tragedy, or a story of blame. It was the story of a girl who was always thinking of her father in every action she took, and, upon being showered with appraisal, delved further into her habits. Nobody here was in the wrong, nor did her family situation feel particularly unusual. Yet Soukichi couldn't help but think that something was off about their dynamic.

"...Oh, and I wasn't forcing myself to read or anything, by the way," Kasumi added. "That was just what got me into reading. And once I started, I couldn't stop. My father was more than willing to buy me as many books as I wanted, and I would read them all."

Kasumi then continued to talk in a virtual ramble. "I guess I... still had a faint hope left. A dream, I suppose. I figured that as long as I listened to my father and was a good girl, maybe my mother would come back one day. That we might live happily ever after again, as a reunited family of three... That was pretty silly of me, huh?"

Kasumi's self-deprecating laugh had caused a tight pain to pierce Soukichi's chest at the time.



"So when you say that Benikawa is your little sister..." Soukichi began, then went silent.

"Yeah. It's a bit more complicated than that, but it'd be accurate enough to call her my sister. Kazumi is my half blood-related sister. Mother married someone else after divorcing my father, and they gave birth to Kazumi," Kasumi explained.

"..."

“They hadn’t even been divorced for a year before she remarried and got pregnant. I’m not too sure about the details, but I think she might be the reason why my parents got divorced in the first place,” Kasumi said.

“...”

“Ahaha. Sorry, I probably shouldn’t be telling you all this.”

“It’s okay...”

Kasumi had a smile on her face that entire time, yet the story itself wasn’t the slightest bit amusing. The two were currently in a room at that karaoke bar they’d been planning on going to. After parting ways with Kazumi, the two of them had gone about their day as they’d discussed. Due to it being the weekend, the establishment was decently crowded, and the room they were given was pretty small and difficult to fit into. It was about half as large as the room that he’d gotten when with Ann.

Normally, he would feel nervous and jumpy from their tight confines causing them to be so close. He’d almost be on the edges of insanity, but now wasn’t the time for that.

“Sigh... This is our first time coming to a karaoke bar, and yet I’ve completely ruined the atmosphere. You probably don’t feel much like singing now, do you? Well, not that we really wanted to sing in the first place,” Kasumi rambled. She appeared to be putting on an act of being vibrant rather than it being truly genuine.

“Benikawa...” Soukichi began.

“Hm?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking... you guys seem to know each other pretty well,” Soukichi said.

Kazumi Benikawa. Kasumi Shiramori’s step-sister. Soukichi had learned at the previous culture festival that Kasumi’s mother had gotten remarried and created a new family with someone else. However, he’d had no knowledge that she’d had a half-sister, let alone that they were on speaking terms with one another. “...I’m not sure if normal is the right word, but yeah, we know each other,” Kasumi said with an awkward smile. “I still periodically meet with my

mother, and I do visit my grandparents on my mother's side on the odd occasion, which means I run into them from time to time. Purposefully trying to avoid them would make everything really weird between us, so I try to be normal when interacting with them. That doesn't make it... any less uncomfortable, though."

"..."

"You know, I bet Kazumi feels even weirder about it than I do. She's likely struggling to figure out how to interact with the daughter of her mother's former husband."

How's that any different from you being in a very similar situation?

Soukichi thought back upon the scene of the two meeting just now. At a second glance, they certainly seemed to be quite distant. They'd both hesitated when laying eyes on each other, and there looked to be a brief moment where they were considering passing by to avoid interacting.

"I'm technically the elder sister, meaning I should be the one trying to smooth over our relationship, but it's not exactly that easy... It's like I can sense how reluctant she is to talk to me, and that only makes our relationship even more strained," Kasumi explained.

I'm willing to bet she probably feels the same.

The two of them felt some strange sense of guilt toward each other, which is the cause of that hesitation of theirs. Soukichi just sensed that to be the case.

"Are you now regretting not waiting for your mother so you could talk with her?" Soukichi asked. He wasn't sure if this was really something he should meddle with, but he ended up doing so anyhow. "She was here today, right?"

"Mmm... Well, I am going to be meeting her soon enough, like I said earlier. So it shouldn't be too much of an issue. We meet every year during the summer, actually," Kasumi said.

"Still, that doesn't mean—"

"Besides," Kasumi only continued, though, basically cutting off Soukichi, "I... wasn't ready for that today. It's never easy seeing her, and I really have to get

myself ready beforehand if I'm going to."

"..."

Soukichi felt a sudden chill pass through him.

Get herself ready? Never easy? She needs to do that much preparation just to meet with her mother?

Your parents were supposed to be the people you trust the most, people you could talk with without hiding how you really are inside. That's what it meant to be family, or at least that's how it was for Soukichi. He never had to do something like that around his mother. This apparently minor aspect of daily life that Soukichi had taken for granted seemed to only apply to his diminished worldview, which he'd only realized just now.

"I don't hate my mother or anything..." Kasumi clarified, sounding like she was making any sort of justification she could for her mother. "She must've had her own reasons for what she did. It isn't my place to criticize her for something I'm not sure about."

She provided that model answer, reminiscent of a monk that'd achieved enlightenment. It was quite mature of her to act that way... from Soukichi's point of view.

"I don't hate her. I just... don't always know how to interact with her. Whenever I see her with Kazumi, I just can't help thinking about how she's not my mother anymore."

Periodically meeting with her daughter even after getting divorced was both the privilege and also likely the duty of a proper mother. Kasumi's mother was still trying her best to perform her motherly role to Kasumi, but Kasumi herself was unsure of how to handle their relationship. She wasn't sure how to treat her after she'd gained herself a new family. She wasn't sure what was allowed and what wasn't. That unanswerable question tormented her to this very day.

"It's not like anyone here is in the wrong," Kasumi continued, sounding as though she was convincing herself. "Neither Mom or Dad did anything wrong, and naturally, Kazumi isn't to blame either. Everyone has their own circumstances and are doing their best to press forward in spite of them. Yet for

some reason... I just can't seem to accept that this is the way things are nowadays, and this uncomfortable feeling won't ever leave me as a result of that."

"..."

"Ahaha... Things would be so much easier if there was a blatant villain in all this, wouldn't it? If there was, we could all just simply barrage them with our negative emotions and be done with it all," Kasumi said.

Kasumi's smile and tone rang somewhat hollow, despite her attempts at joking around with the subject matter. She seemed sad and lonely about it all. Unlike in stories, where good and evil were clearly defined, and with the good doing away with the bad, reality rarely reflected everything in such black and white terms. Villains that you could beat down with your fists as a way of dealing with your negative emotions simply didn't exist.

Everyone, some more awkward than others, was simply doing their best as they made their way in the world. They may not have been malicious in their actions, but somebody might still have gotten hurt. A single gear failing could cause the entire machine to fall into a state of malfunction. A single action could irreparably warp relationships. The world was likely full to the brim with such tales.

There was no clear villain in Kasumi's story, no villain who plotted the destruction of her relationship with her family. In one sense, such a thing was a blessing, but the world, and humans in general, weren't so simple. One could repay malice in kind. If somebody was hurt because of another, then they could simply deal with the source. And even if they didn't possess the abilities to handle that source, they could achieve mental stability by directing all of your hatred at them.

However, if somebody were to be harmed in a world without malice, what could you do?

"Sorry for dampening the mood. And on our first date, too..." Kasumi said in forced cheerfulness and with a hang of the head.

Kasumi was still trying to be considerate of Soukichi with all that they'd discussed, and Soukichi was at a loss for what to do. What should he say to this

girl before him, with that forced smile plastered on her face? Soukichi read books all the time, and despite having only published a single book, he was still technically a professional writer. Yet in spite of all of that, he couldn't think of the words to give to her.

Soukichi cursed his own powerlessness. It wasn't that he'd blanked out or froze under the pressure. He'd even come up with a fair few lines he could use. However, none of them could ever make it out of his mouth.

Saying that won't ease her pain.

Should I really be getting involved in something so personal?

Those thoughts continued to haunt his mind, resulting in him simply sitting there in silence.

Soukichi hated how he was all talk but no action. He couldn't utter a single word at this very moment, in fact. Not a single word as an outsider, as nothing more than a classmate, as her boyfriend on a trial-basis. He had no right to butt into Kasumi's familial matters. Which was why, at the very least...

"...Huh?" Kasumi muttered in surprise.

Kasumi's response was to be expected. After all, Soukichi had just wrapped his arms around her in a strong, firm hug, doing his utmost to cheer her up in any way he could.

"K-Kuroya...?" Kasumi said in a flustered voice.

"Didn't you say that I can get up close and personal whenever I wanted?" Soukichi asked in a shaking voice. He felt like his heart was going to jump out of his throat at any moment. His instincts were telling him to run away, but he forcefully pushed them aside and further embraced her.

"..."

Kasumi didn't respond. However, the tension in Kasumi's body was beginning to dissipate. It seemed she wasn't against this development, or at least Soukichi hoped that to be the case. Soukichi slowly and anxiously strengthened his grip. This wasn't his first time holding Kasumi. When she'd come to his house the previous month, he'd basically tackled her under his bedsheets so as to avoid

his mother finding them together. He was so incredibly panicked at the time that he hadn't had the time to comprehend what hugging her actually felt like.

But now he could. His head was working surprisingly well, and his five senses were even more heightened than usual. His entire body was trying to understand every part of her. Kasumi's body felt unbelievably soft and warm to boot. That was clear even through the thin pieces of fabric separating their skin. A sweet scent wafted from her long silky hair, the scent that was typically muted and only Kasumi could ever give off. It all made his head feel like it was close to exploding.



“Shiramori...”

Soukichi was going to say it, even with his current status with her leaving him to think he had no right to butt into someone else’s personal affairs with her family. He also didn’t have any ingenious plan to break the current deadlock. Despite that, he still decided to go through with it. He was desperate to express his feelings to the person he loved most in the world.

“You’re such a kind person.”

“...Kind?”

“Remember what you said earlier? About how things would be so much easier if there was a blatant villain of all your problems?” Soukichi quoted her almost word-for-word. “The reason you’re capable of thinking that there isn’t a villain, that nobody is in the wrong, is because you’re as kind as you are.”

“...”

“Good and evil is all about perspective,” Soukichi said.

Whether somebody was a saint or a devil changed based on what sort of perspective you were seeing them from. Different people would have all sorts of different reactions if they were dealing with what Kasumi was currently. Some would simply assign blame to those around them as a way to justify their own actions.

However, Kasumi didn’t take the route of hatred in their conflict. She didn’t make that same sort of selfish mistake that others would have.

“...You think I’m kind?” Kasumi asked after a short pause in conversation, a bitter smile on her face. “I wouldn’t go that far. There are few people as calculating and crafty as I am.”

“That’s not true at all,” Soukichi attempted to console her.

“I’m not kind at all. I’m just good at reading the room. I’m so scared of conflict and too wishy-washy about how I feel about things. I constantly abide by whatever the adults around me say in order to avoid any tension. I dodge all my problems by acting mature. I only ever care about myself, even if I may appear differently on the outside,” Kasumi continued.

“...All that still won’t change my mind about you, because I get to decide my own opinions on you, in the end,” Soukichi said.

““I won’t let you insult a work I love any more than you already have.””

“ ...”

““No matter what the author claims, it’s up to the readers to decide their own opinion on a book.””

I won’t let you insult a work I love any more than you already have I get to decide what books I like.

I don’t care if the pros in the industry tore it to pieces, or if it got trampled to death by bad reviews on the internet, or if the author himself hates it. If I had a good experience with it overall, then that’s all that matters.

Soukichi had been in a dark place only a year prior. He had suffered a serious setback, leading to him developing a mental block toward writing. He fell into despair, disparaging his work as a shameful part of his past, and decided that everything he had done held no meaning.

It was Kasumi’s words that pulled him out of that darkness. It was her kind, yet stern encouragement that had managed to convince him that maybe everything he’d done hadn’t been meaningless, and that maybe he shouldn’t feel so embarrassed about his past. She was the dazzling ray of white light that’d managed to break through his melancholy, blackened heart. That was the day that Soukichi’s heart began to perceive color again, the day he regained the courage to pursue his dreams once again. Kasumi was willing to face him at his most self-destructive phase of his life, which was why he, in turn, wanted to be there for her in this present moment. Though he was unable to find the right words, he would convey what his heart felt through this method.

“...Pfft. Ahaha!” Kasumi broke out into laughter soon after. “You got me there. How dare you use my own words against me, underclassman!”

“What does being a year younger than you have to do with that?” Soukichi asked, confused.

“You have a point, Mr. Boyfriend,” Kasumi teased.

“...Your trial boyfriend.”

“Ah, of course, right. Hee hee.”

With that gleeful laugh, Kasumi returned his hug. This abrupt action caused Soukichi's heart to leap inside his chest, and Kasumi's own chest pressed against his, as though to prevent that from happening. The firmness of their current hug made Soukichi feel like his prior hug couldn't even compare.

“W-Wait...” Soukichi said.

“So you think I'm a kind person...” Kasumi delighted in a sweet, lovely voice, almost talking to herself more than anybody in particular.

“It's kinda strange, hearing you say that. It's like you've convinced me that I actually am kind,” Kasumi continued while strengthening her grasp.

Unsure of how to respond, Soukichi simply returned her hug in kind. The two continued with their embrace with no words exchanged for some time. As someone aiming to re-debut as a professional author, he probably shouldn't admit something like this, but he felt like the warmth being exchanged between him and Kasumi right now was far more eloquent and heart-stirring than could ever be put into speech. The two held onto each other, just like that, until the alarm on their phones went off, warning them they only had ten minutes left before the train would depart without them.

That was their first time coming to a karaoke bar together, yet they never ended up singing a single song in that entire time period. Yet in spite of that, Soukichi felt like this would be a day that would live long in his memory.

○

“Sorry, Kasumi. Mom can't live with you two anymore.”

“I'm really sorry...”

“Please don't cry... This isn't a goodbye.”

“Mom will still come see you.”

“Because Mom loves you, Kasumi.”

“Always listen to your Dad now, and be sure to be a really good girl for Mom,

okay?”

And with those final words, Kasumi’s mother left her behind. The young Kasumi naively interpreted her words as that she would eventually return to them if she remained well-behaved, but that day never arrived. Kasumi was forced to confront the truth when she saw her mother with Kazumi—that her mother was no longer ever going to be with her again.

“Kasumi, you’re such a good girl!”

“You’re so much more grown-up than the other kids your age.”

“You’re such an understanding girl. It really takes a load off your Dad’s shoulders.”

“Look, Kasumi, I got you another book.”

“I’m sorry for not being able to play with you, Kasumi.”

“...I see. Thank you.”

Kasumi’s father would praise her, and Kasumi would always enjoy said praise. However, she would constantly feel uneasy whenever her father apologized for his lack of time for her, so she began to grow more and more independent. She did her best to become a child that didn’t require her parent’s attention.

“You’re so dependable, Shiramori.”

“We can trust Kasumi to get it done!”

“You’re so responsible, Shiramori! You’re so much like an adult now!”

“It’s so good to have you around, Kasumi.”

“Shiramori is on another level from us.”

“It must be nice, being able to get along with anyone that easily.”

That was the reputation she had with her friends as a child. She would always read the room, spend her days avoiding trouble, playing the character that others wanted of her. And because of her ability to get along decently with everyone, everybody labeled her as “mature.” It wasn’t that she disliked that label, but for some reason, she couldn’t ever feel happy about it.

Instead, she felt hollow inside. She started adapting herself to that role

because others wanted that from her, and when she lived up to those desires, it began to be expected of her. That vicious cycle continued for years.

It shouldn't have been a problem. As long as she continued to be that mature, likable girl, her life wouldn't have much in terms of issues.

So why, then, did she feel so hollow?

Why did the world around her seem so bereft of color?

Why did she feel so plastic?

Why? Why? Why?

Those thoughts never left her mind. He could never rid herself of that emptiness within her, no matter how hard she tried.

That is, until she met him.

They were now at Sendai Station.

"Oh... the train's already left."

The two went up and down the stairs, and they arrived at their platform just in time to see their train leaving them behind "We just missed it..." Kasumi bemoaned.

"The next one is in... twenty minutes," Soukichi checked his phone.

That didn't take long. Kasumi thought. He must've known that we wouldn't make it... Do I compliment him for being well prepared or poke fun at him for throwing in the towel too easily?

"I guess we'll have to wait, then," Kasumi said.

The two sat down next to each other on a bench. Nobody else was present with them on that platform due to the train's recent departure, the normally bustling sounds of people and trains being replaced by a sense of tranquility as the evening sun shined down upon them.

"...We're going to be getting back a little later than planned. Want to get something to eat when we do?"

"I don't mind... Won't that worry your dad, though?"

“It’ll be fine as long as I call him to let him know in advance. What about you?”

“Everything should be good on my end, too.”

“I see.”

“Yeah...”

The conversation died there.

Well, this is awkward... Kasumi thought. There had been a strange atmosphere between the two of them ever since leaving the karaoke place.

Thinking back on it, that was pretty embarrassing... I didn’t expect any sort of first boyfriend hug at all, let alone for Kuroya to be so manly around me...

Merely thinking back upon the scene caused Kasumi’s face to flush slightly red. Soukichi seemed to have it even worse than her, however. He hadn’t looked Kasumi in the eye once since that interaction of theirs and was very apparently attempting to conceal his strife behind a forced stoic expression. Kasumi eventually felt herself beginning to relax from that very expression.

“...”

After having finally regained her composure somewhat, Kasumi began recounting the events that’d taken place back in the karaoke bar.

Kind. Kuroya thought that she was kind. That made her feel so incredibly happy, yet at the same time, Kuroya only assumed as such because he, himself, was also a kind person at heart.

Kind. Kuroya was unbelievably kind. Kind, sensitive, emotive. He typically put on a cool and blunt persona that she struggled to understand, but inside, he really was just a gentle and warm-hearted man.

Kasumi suddenly recalled the book Soukichi had written — “You’re the Ray of White Light in my Darksome World.” It was, let’s say, tough to summarize the contents into a few words alone. It was about several clumsy kids who struggled to adapt to both school and society as a whole, yet still tried their best to find a way forward, in a clumsy manner that only they could. If one had to assign it a genre, it probably could be considered as a young adult novel. He claimed that

it didn't sell well at all, and Kasumi could imagine why. The contents of the novel didn't appeal to the current market, and the title and summary weren't very eye-catching. She likely wouldn't have purchased the novel, either, if not for knowing the author personally. In fact, she hadn't even known that such a book existed in the first place beforehand.

It wasn't a best-seller, and the plot, characters, and so on didn't allow it to build up a significant fanbase. The prose was stilted here and there, and the setting was clearly lacking in certain respects. The conclusion was such that it would've caused most to question how that could've ever been chosen to end off the book.

In short, most would hesitate to recommend it to others.

Yet in spite of that... the book had had a profound effect on Kasumi. Soukichi's compassionate story left a deep impression on her. She wasn't one to deeply analyze a book's themes and elements due to the author's identity, but she couldn't help doing so in this case.

She felt as though the book was absolutely packed with his brand of gentle, warm goodness for his fellow human beings. It wasn't easy to follow, and the conclusion was hardly satisfying. It didn't have basic motifs about punishing evil, nor was it an exhilarating roller coaster of a story. However, though she struggled to put it into concrete words, to her, it felt like a story of "affirmation."

It wasn't a story of rejection, but of acceptance. The clumsy characters didn't suddenly fix themselves by the end; they stayed clumsy all the way. It didn't attempt to teach moral lessons such as not traveling down the wrong path in life. It felt more like it was telling the reader that a lifestyle such as that might've actually been quite fun overall; it felt more in support of the reader's decision to carry on in that way.

It didn't force its own values or perceptions of how one should act onto the readers. It didn't glorify change and growth as a human being. It was the story of a few odd children who remained odd throughout their lives.

Kasumi couldn't help but feel that the story was very Kuroya-esque. It was a very kind story at its core, just like him. In hindsight, ever since reading that

story— “Shiramori.”

Soukichi suddenly pulled Kasumi back to reality from the depths of her thoughts.

“Hm? What is it?” Kasumi asked and turned toward Soukichi, only to realize that he was facing away from her.

“This is for you...” Soukichi curtly said as he handed her a small package wrapped in paper.

“Huh...? W-What’s this?” Kasumi asked, accepting the package despite her perplexity.

“...A present,” Soukichi replied with a voice that rang of attempts to hide how embarrassed he was feeling. This only added to her confusion.

“Huh? Eh? A present...? For what?”

“Well, no reason in particular, I guess. It’s just... Well, I mean, it’s been a month since we started going out... so I guess you can sort of consider it an anniversary present?”

“...”

“Yeah, never mind that. I’m sorry. Give it back, please. You must think I’m really creepy right now for this. What kind of idiot celebrates a one-month anniversary anyways? This must be weirding you out a lot. So sorry,” Soukichi rambled.

“Oh, no! I’m not weirded out at all! You caught me by surprise, that’s all!” Kasumi yelled out, just as flustered as him.

Soukichi had immediately started trying to take it back with tears in his eyes, having misinterpreted his silence, so Kasumi quickly corrected him.

In truth, she was surprised. Shocked may be a better word. Shocked to the point she could hardly speak.

“Wow... you really threw me for a loop there. I never expected that you had something like this in store for me...” Kasumi said while looking back at him, opening her package in the meantime.

“...Wow!”

Inside was a white bear keychain that took the shape of a white medallion. It was quite cute, yet didn't stand out too much. It was an item of logical design that she could put on her backpack without it looking too flashy.

“How adorable!”

“...That keychain is supposedly based around the combination of Reversi and that bear. I figured it'd be nice to get you something that you had some sort of connection to.”

I see.

Now that Soukichi mentioned it, the bear's face did look a lot like the white stones from Reversi, that white-and-black board game they indeed had a long-standing relationship with.

“Hm? Wait, Reversi...?”

A white and black board game, and Soukichi had given her a white signifier of that.

“Does that mean you...?”

“...”

Soukichi quietly took out another keychain from his pocket, an awkward expression on his face. The design was practically the same as the one Kasumi had, only in a completely different color: black, with a black bear to boot.

“You got us matching keychains?!” Kasumi screamed out.

“...” Soukichi stayed silent.

“Hoho? Now this, I did not expect,” Kasumi said.

Kasumi had always assumed that Soukichi wasn't too fond of something like that.

“Sorry, you can give it back now. Who the heck gives their girlfriend matching keychains? They must be a real creep...” Soukichi continued to belittle himself.

“No! I really like it, and I'm not returning it to you!” Kasumi exclaimed.

Sheesh! What is he so afraid of? Can he not tell how happy I am right now?!

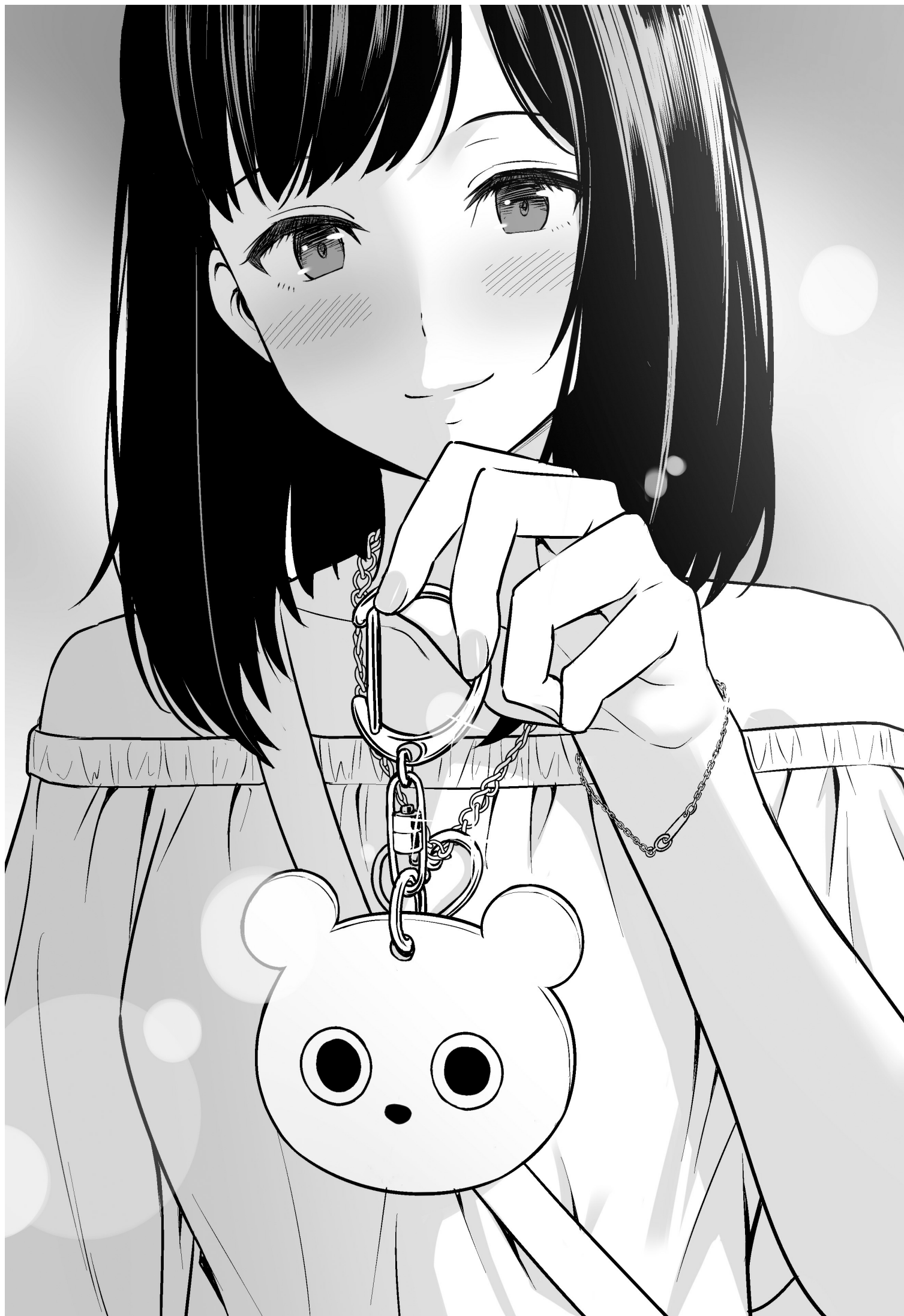
"I really appreciate you for doing this, Kuroya. Thank you so much."

"Y-You're welcome."

"Sorry I didn't have a present for you," Kasumi apologized.

Kasumi had known about their one-month anniversary, but she hadn't thought about getting a surprise present for it.

"Don't worry about it. I made the decision to get you one myself, after all," Soukichi said.



Kasumi still had mixed feelings about the matter, however.

I screwed up big time...

Kasumi felt apologetic, as well as slightly frustrated.

Hmmmh... He seriously got the better of me this time. Who gave you permission to be so awesome! Don't you know how fast my heart is pounding at this moment?! I've fallen in love with you all over again now! How are you always so unreliable, yet so cool at these particular moments?! That hug back at the karaoke bar, as well! You're only a massive ladykiller when it matters! Ahhh! Arghhhh!!!

"I have to at least do something for you, then..." Kasumi said in a soft voice that muted the pounding of her heart. She reached out her hands and gently wrapped them around his cheeks.

"This is all I can do for now," Kasumi continued.

"Eh? Huh?"

Soukichi blinked at a rapid pace with eyes wide open. Kasumi, comparatively, closed her eyes and slowly moved in closer. Closer and closer, until their lips were about to touch—before gently pinching his cheeks, just like how she did back in the clubroom before.

"Pinchy-pinch!"

"..."

"Pinchy-pinch~!"

"...Wh-Whaw aww yuu duuin?" Soukichi slurred.

"Hm? You can't tell? It's a massage full of love for you," Kasumi said in such a saccharine tone that hearts were practically flowing from her mouth.

"Ofh, tyat sho?" Soukichi replied with a somewhat tired expression on his face.

"What's this? You look disappointed. Were you expecting something else, perhaps?" Kasumi continued to tease him.

"...Nhot rheally," Soukichi replied, sulking. Kasumi couldn't help but find him

extremely cute at the moment.

In the end, Kasumi had only played around with him so much because she'd failed to give him a present in return. She knew just how messed up what she was doing was, but she couldn't control herself.

Sorry, Kuroya. I just can't stop myself right now.

"Pinchy pinch~!"

"H-Hwow lhong dho yuu plahn on dhoing theesh?"

"Hey, try saying 'class library.'"

"I refuse!" Soukichi shouted, before finally pulling away from her and beginning to rub his sore cheeks. "Sheesh... Shiramori, you're awfully childish sometimes."

It took Kasumi a moment to process those words, likely due to this being the first time somebody had ever referred to her.

"...I'm childish? Really?"

"Yes, you are. You really are."

"Everyone else calls me really mature."

"They're all being deceived by your looks and the atmosphere you give off. You like teasing people and enjoy watching people when they're having a tough go of it. That's how a little kid acts," Soukichi puffed, his face red.

There was probably no deeper meaning to his words. Chances are he was simply frustrated at her fooling around with him and ended up saying the first thing on his mind. However, it's precisely because of that, because he truly seemed to think that from the bottom of his heart, that the words pierced her so deeply. The words she at first didn't understand, gradually melted deeper and deeper, filling her heart.

"Huh... you might be right about that," Kasumi said as a smile suddenly pops out onto her face. "I guess I might unleash more of that side to me when I'm with you, Kuroya."

"What do you mean by that?" Soukichi asked.

“All sorts of things,” Kasumi said.

Soukichi had a mystified look on his face, and the reason why must've come in how Kasumi had never looked so happy before in her entire life. She had always had to act mature beyond her years ever since she was a little girl. She wanted to become an adult, and those around her actively wanted the same of her. As a result, she forced herself into fulfilling that role of maturity.

She didn't think she was mistaken in doing so, because it was a byproduct of her familial situation at the time. Being labeled as mature never bothered her at all, either.

Having said that, she'd now just discovered that even she possessed a childish side to herself that she'd never realized was always there, and that Soukichi had helped her to find. Perhaps it was only after meeting him that this aspect of her personality came to be. She'd lived her whole life portraying an adult, but she reverted back to a child whenever around Soukichi. She reverted back to a little girl that you could find just about anywhere, a girl that teased the boy they liked because of their own affection for them.

Chapter Six

A Change of Advisor

Soukichi received a phone call the night he returned home from that date. Although he would've liked to have basked in the glow of it for a little while longer, he wasn't in a position to complain. He was taking advantage of the other party's good will, and so he was required to accommodate his time to their schedule.

“—And those were the two points that caught my eye. They're pretty minor details overall, and it's more out of a personal interest than anything. Therefore, it's up to you whether or not you want to change them up.”

Soukichi let out a sigh of relief upon hearing the voice through the phone while sat in front of his computer. The person currently calling him was Rake Umikawa, a veteran author who'd amassed several releases on multiple different labels, with works spanning from novels to manga and even to game scenarios. Most important of all, though, Rake was the only professional author that Soukichi was acquainted with.

During middle school, a publishing company had reached out to Soukichi in regards to a novel he'd uploaded to the internet, resulting in him putting out his first book as a professional author. It was ultimately a total flop, and the editor he'd put so much trust into, who had praised him to no end previously, began completely ignoring him the moment he realized Soukichi's work wasn't going to sell enough.

He was ready to put his pen and paper away for good after that, but a lot had happened since then, and he got back into writing around the time of last year's cultural festival. He'd decided to try his hand at going pro again. However, he was all alone now after everything, and in what could only be considered grasping at straws, he'd contacted Rake, asking for his help.

“Then does that mean that chapter three is more or less fine?” Soukichi asked.

“Yeah. I enjoyed the overall flow of it. It really kept my interest,” Rake replied.

“Thank you. I’ll take a look at the two points you highlighted and then continue on to the next chapter once I’m done with that,” Soukichi said.

Rake was helping Soukichi by looking over his book. After telling Rake that he was looking to write another book, Rake said that he would do his best to get Soukichi in touch with an editing department he knew, under the condition that Soukichi could “write a book that meets my quality standards.” Since then, Soukichi had been making sure to consult Rake in regards to his writing, and he’d experienced multiple rejections from even as far back as the storyboarding phase before eventually getting into the writing portion.

Rake thankfully hadn’t given him as many corrections during his writing, perhaps as a result of all those rejections beforehand. He did have to rewrite the first chapter over and over again, but the second and third didn’t require as many revisions. Little by little, Soukichi was approaching the finish line.

“I’ve already begun on chapter four, I’ll probably send it over before the month’s out,” Soukichi said, his spirits uplifted by his praise.

“About that...” Rake began in a softer tone, “You don’t need to send me any more chapters.”

“Huh?”

“I was thinking it’s about time for me to stop being your editor,” Rake then dropped that veritable bombshell.

“...”

“I’ve gotten pretty busy recently, which is making it a lot harder for me to attend to your book. And since I’d rather do no job at all than a sloppy one, I was thinking that this would be the last time,” Rake explained.

“...I see,” Soukichi responded, though in a daze.

That had affected him more than he thought it would. It felt like the ladder that led to the promised land had suddenly been pulled out from under him.

However, he wasn’t upset at him. In fact, he knew that this day would come at some point. Their relationship up until now had been abnormal, and now things were simply returning to normal. Rake had claimed that this was

beneficial for him, and that it wasn't just philanthropy that led to him doing this, but in actuality, it couldn't be anything but. Rake had been watching over a novice writer like him all the way from his work's creation to the actual writing of the story without getting paid. Soukichi had no right to complain about him cutting off their work partnership out of the blue.

"...I understand. Thank you for everything," Soukichi said gratefully.

"Hahaha. It's really no problem. Don't be so uptight about it," Rake replied.

"It might be really hard, but I'll continue to work hard on my own. Once I finish, I'll try registering my work in a few rookie competitions, and then I'll work my way—"

"Huh? On your own? Rookie competitions?" Rake asked in incredulity, then continued after a period of silence. "Ohh, sorry, sorry. I must've not made things clear for you."

"Did you think I gave up on you or something? Did you genuinely feel I was just going to go back on all those promises I made you?"

"Eh...? Uh, well..." Soukichi stumbled over his words.

"Ahaha, I'm not that terrible a person thankfully. When I said it was time for me to stop being your editor, I meant it was time for *me* to stop pretending to be an editor," Rake clarified. "You should really get to working with a proper editor instead of me from now on."

"With a proper editor? Are you saying that...?"

"I'll introduce you to an editorial department, and I'll write you a good recommendation using my connections," Rake said.

Soukichi was stunned into silence.

"What's the matter? You aren't happy to hear that?" Rake asked.

"O-Of course I am. It's just this is so sudden, and... I mean... I thought you said you'd only do that after I've finished something that's up to your standards," Soukichi stumbled over his words

"That's what I was intending, yeah, but I doubt there's much of a point in that anymore. Sure, I did make a lot of changes with the initial phases, but there

hasn't been much ever since then, right?" Rake said.

That was true. Rake hadn't made any major changes to the second and third chapters. The suggestions made today were also quite minor in nature, like, "You didn't explain this clearly enough. You should put it in simpler terms."

"You've improved a lot in the past six months. All I can really impart on you now is some business marketing stuff and writing theory. You were like a sponge, absorbing everything I had to tell without complaint. I had a lot of fun being your mentor for a while there," Rake heaped praise on Soukichi.

"You flatter me..." Soukichi replied.

"However, now's the time to stop playing around with you, so to speak," Rake stated in a determined tone.

"Playing around...?"

"Yeah. This was all just a fun pastime for me," Rake continued, sounding like he was insulting himself with those words.

"Claiming to act in good faith while instructing others, yet doing it in such a condescending manner and taking no responsibility whenever something goes awry is nothing more than simple entertainment for a lot of people. You see it all the time on social media, yeah? People that show up and start giving unwanted advice for no reason whatsoever."

"..."

Soukichi understood where Rake was coming from. That definitely sounded self-rewarding for whoever was doing that, meaning that Rake was having a great deal of enjoyment from this divergence from his usual work. Yet he wasn't all too bothered by that.

"I'm still really thankful that you helped me in the first place, even if it was only something done for your own amusement. You've really helped me a lot," Soukichi said.

"I'm glad to hear that. Still, you have to think of all that as little league stuff. If you continue to work without being held responsible for what you're doing, you'll never progress further than your current level," Rake said.

“...”

“You really want to become a professional again? Then this can’t keep going. I’m saying, as a responsible professional, you have to work with a genuine editor to get your book to be the best it can be,” Rake continued in a stern tone, before adding more in a playful flair. “Well, having said that, editorial departments aren’t exactly big on authors bringing in works that are basically in their completed form. Different labels and editors have different marketing strategies, so the earlier you get yourself an editor, the better.”

“...Got it,” Soukichi said with a nod, taking in all of Rake’s wisdom. “I will give my all with whatever editing department you pair me with.”

“Good.”

“So... I really can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done up till now. I’ll be sure to repay it all back sometime in the future.”

“Ahaha, you can be so dramatic sometimes. I’ll be looking forward to that day when you become a megastar. No really. I mean that... to an extent,” Rake joked.

Rake may have been joking in saying that, but that last part made Soukichi feel really happy inside.

“I’m excited to see what you come out with. Both as a fellow author, and as a partial reader,” Rake said.

“Sounds good!” Soukichi bellowed as he stored those special words of encouragement within his heart.

“Anyways, regarding the editorial department I was going to introduce you to... I’ve actually been talking with them for a while now,” Rake revealed.

“O-Oh, you have?” Soukichi stammered.

“Sorry for not telling you before. I didn’t want to get your hopes up for no reason, so I kept hush-hush about it. I’ve been talking about you with an editor that happens to be one of my friends. They’ve also read your storyboard up to chapter three, just like I have.”

“...”

“They were quite impressed and are very much willing to work with you.”

“S-Seriously?”

“My friend in question here is one of the best editors I know, so I can’t imagine you’ll have much issue with them. Then again, you never know until you actually get down to it. Ultimately, there always has to be synergy between the author and the editor. Some authors might love certain editors, while others will hate them equally as much,” Rake imparted.

“...”

Soukichi understood that all too well. He really didn’t mesh well with his previous editor at all. To be perfectly honest, Soukichi disliked him quite a bit, to the point that it was verging on hatred. However, there were still authors that got along well with that very same guy, and multiple of them have found massive success alongside him. In the end, good and evil is in the eye of the beholder. It was only natural for somebody to both irritate some and get along with others.

“There likely doesn’t exist an editor that’s perfect for everyone,” Rake continued.

“...”

“Though strangely enough, the opposite very much does,” Rake said.

“...Ahaha,” Soukichi chuckled at that statement. It wasn’t really something to laugh about, but if you didn’t laugh, you’d likely feel depressed instead. Rake then moved onto the next topic after a brief clearing of his throat. “I know that you had a lot of problems with your previous editor and still bear painful memories from that experience. Still, I’d like you to have an open mind when it comes to this. You can very well ask for somebody different if you two don’t gel together. There’s no point in continuing to push through in spite of your hangups. Taking decisive action in your choices is how you strive forward and thrive onward in this business.”

“U-Understood,” Soukichi said.

“I mean, I highly doubt it’ll work out poorly with her, to be honest. She’s somebody that highly values the creative freedom of the writers she works

with,” Rake continued.

“W-Wait, it’s a she?” Soukichi asked in total surprise.

“Hm?”

“The editor your introducing me to... is a woman?” Soukichi asked for further explanation.

“Yeah, do you have a problem with that?” Rake pressed him.

“Well, no...”

“A lot of light novel editors are women. As a matter of fact, I know multiple labels where the editor-in-chief is a woman.”

“I see...”

“...Will it be a struggle for you, working with a woman?” Rake asked.

“N-No, not at all. It’s just... How do I put it...? Well, the current story I’m working on has a few pretty suggestive scenes, you know? Like that one scene where the protag stumbles in on some girls? I feel like it’d be incredibly embarrassing for a female editor to go over a scene like that and even take it apart for any issue. I might just die if I end up scaring her off because she thinks I’m a massive virgin.”

“...Pfft!”

Soukichi could hear Rake burst into laughter on the other side of the phone.

“Hahaha! You don’t need to worry about that! She’s a professional, and you’re both in a professional relationship. Who cares about some pervy scenes?” Rake guffawed.

“I-I know that, but still...” Soukichi trailed off.

“Heh heh heh... Are you still going through puberty, Kuroya? It completely slipped my mind due to how you carry yourself, but I’ve just remembered that you’re still in high school”

Rake was beside himself in laughter.

Yeahhh... Thinking about it, I am being way too self conscious about this. There are tons of light novel authors who include risque stuff in their work.

There's nothing to be embarrassed about. If anything, it's more embarrassing to be embarrassed by that.

“Also, she may be a woman, but she’s basically a whole generation above you in age. Her kids are practically your age by now. I doubt you’ll feel too awkward around her,” Rake said.

“Mhmm...” Soukichi nodded to himself.

“If that’s all that you’re worried about, then you two shouldn’t have too many problems. I’ll let them know so you can work out any of the nitty-gritty with her directly.”

The editor Rake was introducing him to was actually not working at a specific publisher solely, but instead worked at an agency.

“The number of editors going independent and running their own agency have been on the rise as of late. To put it in layman’s terms, the company is responsible for the management of the authors they have contracts with. They communicate with publishers, game companies, and whoever else they have to, and assist with the author’s scheduling and stuff to that effect. Agencies take on all of the overhead management load so that the authors can focus on the work side of things,” Rake explained.

“I was thinking that getting a contract with an agency, and having them handle all the tasks other than writing would best suit your personality. Unless you’re like me, and prefer to handle all negotiations personally, of course, but you’d probably rather avoid doing that, wouldn’t you?”

Rake was precise in his reading of Soukichi. Soukichi had absolutely zero interest in that. By signing an agency contract, he’ll have the management fees deducted from his royalties based on the terms. However, having access to all of their many resources would be quite beneficial for somebody who was just dipping their toes into the industry.

There were always going to be agencies that took advantage of that dynamic by forcing beginners into contracts that were against their best interests, but since Rake was the one recommending them to him, that shouldn’t be too much of a problem. The company itself was also well-known, to the extent that even he had heard of it before. By his knowledge, it was a now famous agency

that was created by a renowned editor from a major light novel publisher who decided to go independent with their work.

“For starters, I feel it’d be best for her to help you get your book a publishing deal somewhere. There’s no need to sign a contract right away, and said contracts can take many different forms in the long run. As unlikely as I think it’ll be, in the event that a dispute occurs, feel free to contact me whenever. It’d be on me for being the one to introduce the company to you, after all,” Rake said.

Even after all he’d already done for him, Rake was still going to the effort of looking after him in lieu of this massive transition in his life.

Sheesh... There’s a limit to how nice you can be, you know.

Despite everything he’d told him earlier about this merely being a side show, another source of entertainment for him, Soukichi couldn’t help but find him to be exceedingly nice to him. Soukichi swore to himself that he would reimburse all of that kindness of his in full, only feeding his desire to grow into an exceptional author even more..

Once he’d hung up for the day, it wasn’t long before Soukichi received an email from the editor in question. Rake must’ve gotten in contact with her soon after their call had ended. After exchanging some brief greetings, the two were to have a phone call at her suggestion for further discussion about their work. Soukichi then sent her an email containing his phone number, and waited in unadulterated nervousness for several minutes before the call finally came.

“He-Hello?” Soukichi answered.

“Sorry for calling so late at night. Am I speaking with Mr. Soukichi Kuroya?” the voice on the other end responded. Her voice was polite and also quiet, yet gentle in nature.

“Yes, that’s right. You can call me Kuroya,” Soukichi said.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Kuroya. My name is—”

“—Hey, Mama—”

All of the sudden, a different voice cut into the telephone call. It sounded like

she must've been the editor's daughter. Rake did mention that she had kids.

"Wha—? W-Wait. I'm on a work call right now!"

"Oh, that so? Well, not like that matters much. Your underwear is lying in the hallway, by the way."

"Kyaaa?! Wh-What?! Why is my underwear in the hallway?!"

"Probably just dropped it while you were doing laundry, I imagine."

"Oh, that makes se—Wait a second! I specifically told you I was on the phone! Why did you bring up my underwear?!"

"Who cares? It's not like they can hear us or anything."

"What if they did hear?!"

"They probably can't hear me, but that'll change real quick with how much you're yelling."

"Wh-What?!"

She's right...

Soukichi couldn't really tell what the daughter was saying due to how far away from the phone she was, but he more or less figured out the situation because of the editor's tone of voice. It seemed that this daughter of hers found her underwear lying out in the hallway.

"J-Just leave for right now! I'll take care of this first!" the woman yelled out in a panic.

"Okay, okay. Sowwy!"

Once her daughter had finally left, she quickly apologized for what'd happened.

"My sincerest apologies, Mr. Kuroya. That was incredibly unprofessional of me. I work from home, and that unfortunately leads to unfortunate accidents like this taking place on the odd occasion..."

"I-It's okay, I don't mind. Was that your daughter just now?" Soukichi asked.

"Yes. She's currently in her first year of high school," the woman answered.

“First year of high school? So she’s about my age then,” Soukichi realized.

“Indeed. You are quite young for an author, after all,” she replied.

Soukichi had assumed she was just being polite, but...

“I see... so the time has finally arrived, has it? I’m about to begin working with an author who is around the same age as my daughter. When I’d gotten an assignment with a very famous author a long time ago, he’d mocked me for having a daughter the same age as his... But it looks like the shoe is very much on the other foot now. This industry moves quickly, and the authors I’ve been working with have been progressively growing younger and younger as the years go by. It looks like the time has come for me to work with the youngest author yet...”

Apparently, she’d merely been lamenting the unrelenting passage of time.

“Ah! S-Sorry, once again, that was incredibly unprofessional of me,” the woman exclaimed, having finally been made aware of her tangent.

“It’s fine. Please don’t let yourself get too down about that.”

“Yes. I’ll do my best to remain in high spirits,” she said in a voice on the verge of tears, before correcting herself and speaking in a more businesslike tone.

“Now then, we got sidetracked a little, so I’ll carry on from where we left off during our introductions. I’m Ayako Katsuragi, of Lightship Ltd.”

Soukichi’s new editor was apparently the mother of a single daughter around his age.



Soukichi’s first call with Ayako came to an end in a single hour. The important thing to note here is that Soukichi was able to express how short the hour had felt to him. Soukichi was a loner who struggled immensely in daily communication, and who couldn’t help getting anxious upon his first call with anybody on the phone. Nevertheless, it had felt like barely any time had passed while on the phone with her.

It was a loose meeting, with more self introductions and other random topics of conversation mixed into the business stuff, but Soukichi thought it to have been an extremely productive call. Naturally, the reason behind that was

entirely thanks to Ayako—whose personality and conversational abilities, or perhaps her skill as an editor, bore the burden of the entire conversation with ease. Ayako had lived up to Rake’s estimations as one of the best editors he knew.

A meeting that brief was hardly enough to properly judge someone, and it went without saying that a newcomer like him was incapable of judging her true abilities as an editor from a conversation alone.

Having said that, he had a lot of fun in their meeting. She gave clear and precise instructions on what parts to adjust and made sure to listen to his own input on various things. She went above and beyond in complimenting the parts he wanted her to and held nothing back in the parts that weren’t of a higher quality. To be honest, he had doubts about Ayako when her daughter had interrupted the call, but that impression of her had done a complete 180 within just ten minutes.

Soukichi truly believed that she was an incredible editor, the type of editor that he would love to work more within in the future. What made him happy beyond all else, however, is that she’d taken time out of her seemingly busy daily life to read his debut work, “You’re the Ray of White Light in my Darksome World.” He was very pleased about her positive review of it, but more importantly, to him, it served as a sign of her dedication to their working relationship. It was entirely possible that she only read it in expectation of him to feel that way, but that didn’t change how much that’d really improved his mood.

Still, I’ve really changed a lot...

The past Soukichi could never have imagined that the day would come where he would feel so much joy from something like that. The old him would’ve likely dismissed any sort of review of that previous humiliation of his, regardless of whether it was positive or negative. He’d had an allergic reaction whenever someone even brought it up irrespective of what context it was in. It didn’t matter what anybody said; he couldn’t find it within himself to believe them, and he continued to run away from it as he wallowed in his own self-hatred.

Not anymore, though.

Soukichi was now somewhat more honest with his feelings. He felt joy from any positive feedback on his work. This was, by all appearances, down to Kasumi's influence on him. If he hadn't met her, his debut work would remain a dark stain in his mind, and he'd probably still begin hyperventilating with any slight reminder of its existence. Soukichi would even go so far as to say that Kasumi was the biggest reason as to why the meeting had gone as well as it had.

"Wait, how did I end up back at Kasumi?" Soukichi asked himself, his self-mockery apparent.

Ugh... How am I supposed to respond whenever she teases me for always thinking about her at every moment of my life? It's like I'm proving her right at the moment...

"Sigh..."

Soukichi then quickly switched gears, as there was a lot of stuff that he had to get to currently. He had to keep going with his manuscript, and he needed to begin mulling over a new agency contract with Lightship. Being that he was still a minor, he'd likely require his parent's consent, and so it was imperative for him to find the perfect time to break the news to them.

Is everything going to turn out alright with that?

Soukichi hadn't told his parents that he'd been secretly writing a book. It was entirely possible that his parents would be vehemently opposed to that. He had grown rather mentally unstable after the release of his debut, after all, so much so that he'd become a recluse, locking himself in his room and rarely attending school.

Back then, they must've been so worried about him all the time. He wouldn't be surprised to meet any sort of backlash from his decision. However, Soukichi was now determined. He was confident that he'd convince them somehow in spite of how they felt. He couldn't contain his feelings any longer; the passion for writing was threatening to explode from him at any moment.

He wanted to hurry up and complete the story he was working on. He wanted to complete it while all its details were still fresh in his mind. He wanted others to read it as soon as possible. As many people as wanted to. What was most

important to him, however, was for the most important person to him in the world, his girlfriend to—

“...All right.”

His motivations now revived once more, Soukichi didn't move toward his notebook computer for further writing, as a matter of fact, but instead prepared to go to sleep. It was far too late to be doing as such. It wasn't an issue of how passionate he was feeling at that current moment; it was foolish of him to spend the entire night writing. Not only would he be operating at a lower level the entire day tomorrow, but it also wouldn't serve to produce his best work. When night came, it was time for sleeping. It was important for him to maintain a proper routine, and it was precisely because writers have a lot of freedom that they should strive to live a healthy lifestyle. Soukichi had seen many professional authors tweet as such on Ttwitter.

He got into his pajamas, brushed his teeth, and briefly went to the bathroom. He then returned to his room, confirmed his pre-order of the Kids beautiful girl anime “Love Kaiser”, and got himself ready to sleep.

Just before he was able to, though, he received a new message on his phone.

The sender was Ann Ukyou. It was quite a curt message that didn't leave for any lollygagging, nor any sort of apology for how late it was.

“Kuroya, you free tomorrow?”

“...Ugh.”

There it is. The absolute worst type of question to ever ask someone.

Soukichi believed that somebody should always inform the other of what business they're asking about prior to that sort of question. Their availability was entirely dependent on that. If someone had free time, but they didn't want to deal with whatever business they were asking about, then they could simply refuse by telling the other they had other things to attend to. That way, nobody gets hurt.

Well, in this case, Soukichi felt like he knew the answer already.

Man, what do I do here?

There was an 80 to 90 percent chance, or rather a 100 percent chance that it had something to do with Tokiya. He could easily imagine himself getting dragged into another private strategy meeting to help facilitate their relationship.

Ahh... Do I really have to sacrifice my precious Sunday for her?

“...Mnghhh—”

With a fair few seconds of pained groaning, Soukichi eventually responded to her.

“I’m free, what’s the matter?”

He had several reasons for doing so, but the biggest reason was seemingly out of guilt. Despite his initial promise to keep their meetings a secret, he immediately went and spilled the beans to Kasumi on the very same day.

He didn’t regret making that decision, but he still felt guilty all the same. Because of that, he’d just have to deal with the consequences, even if it meant no longer having Sunday free to himself. Ann, abiding by his expectations of her, replied soon after.

“Iright! Meet up at the same karaoke bar we went to last time at 1:00 P.M! We’re gonna have a strategy meeting!”

And thus, Soukichi’s precious weekend was going to be spent supporting Ann’s quest to fulfill her budding romance. Soukichi thus went to bed, with annoyance racking his mind.

At that moment, he had no way of knowing... that this very meeting would serve to create a massive crack in the relationship between him and Kasumi.

Epilogue & Next Prologue

It was now Monday, the start of a new week, and two days after her first date with Soukichi, and Kasumi was headed toward school as per usual.

“...”

Whoops. I gotta be more mindful of that.

Her cheeks would begin to relax at any lowering of her guard. She couldn't help making such a happy expression whenever that date with Soukichi crossed her mind.

Hah... That really was incredible.

There had been some unexpected events that took place along the way, yet Kasumi felt it to be the best date that she could ever ask for. The time they'd spent together was blissful, sacred, and irreplaceable.

Sheesh... It is crazy how happy I am at the moment. Why is he always lacking in confidence around me? Maybe I should try telling him that I'd prefer him to be the opposite?

“Yo, Kasumi.”

Someone suddenly gave her a strong tap on the shoulder from behind by the entranceway as she was lost in her own thoughts.

“Good morning, Ann,” Kasumi greeted.

“Heya. Wassup, Kasumi? You're lookin' awfully happy this mornin',” Ann said.

“I do? I don't feel different, though,” Ann replied.

Although she was trying her best to appear calm on the outside, inside, she'd practically broken out into a nervous sweat.

This is bad! This is bad!! Is it really that obvious?! I'm always exceptional at hiding how empty I am inside! Why am I so terrible at hiding my joy, then?!

“Hm? What's that?” Ann asked while looking at Kasumi's backpack.

Kasumi realized her eyes were focused on the white bear keychain attached to her backpack, the one she'd gotten as a present from Kuroya. She couldn't

control herself and ended up affixing it to her backpack. In fact, she put it on the backpack she took to school, which made it even more prominent, almost as if she were showing it off to the world.

Sigh... How embarrassing. I really need to get myself together here. I can hardly imagine Kuroya wearing his, and people won't exactly deduce we're in a relationship if they only see my part of our matching keychains. And if he did... Well, I'll deal with that problem when it arises.

"You always had this with ya, Kasumi?" Ann asked.

"Well... it's actually new. I bought it over the weekend," Kasumi lied.

"Hmm...? It's pretty cute, I gotta say," Ann complimented

"Thanks. How was your weekend, Ann?" Kasumi asked.

"Me? Let's say... I had a very productive weekend," Ann said, clearly dodging something.

Well, I already know the answer to that.

Yesterday, Kuroya had sent her a message telling her that she'd be meeting with Ann over the weekend.

I told him that I wasn't worried about Ann, yet he still reports to me everything they do. It's honestly a bit much. It's not like I'm constantly suspecting you of cheating or anything like that. I'm not that narrow minded.

Kasumi wasn't worried about the two meeting up—okay, that would be an outright lie, since she did feel a little uncomfortable at the thought, but she felt like she could trust Kuroya on this. Also, as Ann's friend, she was really hoping for her success.

"That so? I'm glad to hear that, then," Kasumi said.

Kasumi feigned belief in her cover story, changed shoes, and began walking toward the third year's classrooms with her.

"Oh yeah."

Then Ann opened her mouth as they went up the stairs, having seemingly remembered something.

“Ya got a second year with ya in your club, right? Name’s Kuroya, if I ‘member correctly?”

“...Yeah.”

Kasumi was left somewhat surprised. She never expected Ann to suddenly bring up Kuroya.

“What about him?” Kasumi asked.

“Well, you know... Recently, by complete coincidence, and I mean that, y’know, I talked with ‘im for a bit... and he’s pretty fantastic,” Ann said in a voice full of pride. “He’s a professional writer, ain’t he?”

“...”

Kasumi momentarily lost her balance in how astonished she was.

Why does Ann know that? Did he reveal that to her yesterday? I can’t see him doing that willingly.

Soukichi’s professional debut as an author had been a traumatic experience for him. There’s no way he would randomly divulge that to others without much prompting involved. The event was an important footprint of his life, and it wasn’t something that could be viewed so easily by others.

The only ones at this school who should know about it are Tokiya, who knew him since middle school, and I. Why does Ann—

“Man, he’s quite the guy. I’ve never in my life met somebody like that. Seriously, he is crazy unbelievable. Imagine bein’ a professional writer despite havin’ not even graduated yet,” Ann continued in a bright, yet boastful manner, unmindful of the tumult Kasumi was currently experiencing.

“And get a load of this... Heh-heh.”

Kasumi, who had never been so agitated in her entire life, suffered a jolt to the heart the likes of which she couldn’t have ever imagined by what Ann said next.

“I got to read the story he’s currently workin’ on.”

Kasumi’s brain froze in an instant. She couldn’t make sense of those words

that'd just flowed from Ann's mouth.

"Story... he's currently working on?" Kasumi asked lifelessly.

"Ya bet. He ain't shown it to ya yet?" Ann asked.

"...He hasn't, no," Kasumi said.

"Now that's... Oh yeah, now that ya mention it, he told me that nobody else had ever seen it before besides me. And ya know what that means? I'm technically his first reader. Heh-heh. Wow, I feel like a queen all a sudden," Ann continued.

"..."

"From what I got, he ain't quite done with it yet, but it was still crazy good! I just couldn't put it down at all, and ya know me by now! Man, I am super looking forward to what's next!"

"..."

"Apparently he's also got an editor assigned to him, and it's a guarantee it'll be out in the world someday. It's going to be in bookstores at some point! Maybe I can nab a signature from him before that happens. Ya never know how valuable that'll be if he ends up blowing up huge."

"..."

Ann's words could no longer access her brain, yet their sharpness still stabbed deep within her heart. They only continued their assault, as though seeking to rip it out from within.

Why. Why? Why?! Why?! Why why why why?!

An indescribable sense of anxiety filled her, before a deluge of memories unwillingly flooded her whole body.

o

It was during the culture festival last year, after everything had gone so smoothly—

"..."

The two of them were alone in the clubroom, and Kuroya was slumped across

his desk in a deep slumber. He apparently hadn't slept recently in order to assist Kasumi to the best of his abilities. Despite his general ungainliness, he nevertheless did his best in that task. And now that everything was over, he was finally offered that well-needed rest.

Kasumi sat there with him and gazed at the sleeping face of her hero, full of felicity.

"...Hey, Kuroya," Kasumi said to that very sleeping face, "I hope you write another book someday."

Kasumi knew that he couldn't hear her, and that's precisely why she could be so forthright with her feelings. Kasumi herself detested how annoying she was as a person, and she knew that she could never tell him how she truly felt while he was awake. She was a sly, advantageous coward of a woman, as well as ineffective at confronting or giving her real feelings on anything. This would be impossible for her in normal circumstances.

"I think you should start writing again, Kuroya. I believe you have a lot of talent, and more importantly, I really want to read more from you. I love the way you write, Kuroya," Kasumi continued, her desires overflowing from her now.

Then she spoke those words, born of a desire to have him all to herself. As his fan, and as a love-smitten girl. "Write another book, Kuroya, and ...I'd love for you to let me be the first to read it, if you'd allow me. I want to be the first one, before anyone else in the entire world, to get a taste of who you are, Kuroya."

And so she laid bare that entirely embarrassing wish of hers, in all its disgraceful, selfish, and pitiful glory. It was entirely one-sided, thinking nothing of the other party in question, yet held so much inherent value to it. It was a wish akin to that of a prayer to the heavens above.

Afterword

Now that I have kids of my own, I understand even more than before that when adults tell you to “be good children,” they’re really telling you to “be good children for them.” They want you to be a kid that suits them and society at large. There’s nothing truly wrong with that, of course. In most cases, being “good for someone else” and “doing something good for someone else” equate to one another. Without a doubt, being a “good kid” makes one’s life much easier in the grand scheme of things. It’s just, well, when we ask children to be good, and when we scold them for being bad, are we doing that for their sake, or for our own? I’m not claiming that either one is good or bad, or anything of that sort, but I’d like to challenge everyone to be cognizant of that distinction, because acting patronizing is very undignified overall. When you want to make things easier for yourself, you shouldn’t say “I’m saying this to help you.” You should instead say “I want to make things easier for me, so please help me out here! Be a good kid and help me!” I want to be a good dad that can be honest and upfront with my children.

With that out of the way, hello there. I’m Kota Nozomi, and this is the second volume of a romantic comedy where an adolescent boy’s love for his upperclassmen is accidentally exposed to that very person. In this volume, they go on a date, and a little bit of Kasumi’s past is touched upon.

Sorry about that obvious cliffhanger to pull people into buying the next volume. The third volume will contain detailed recountings of what happened at the culture festival in Soukichi’s first year, as well as more in-depth divings into the relationship between Soukichi and Kasumi. I hope you’re all looking forward to it

Also, the current volume offers a small introduction to the female editor with a daughter, Ayako Katsuragi... who might just be the heroine of “You like me, not my Daughter?!”, which I’m publishing under Dengeki Bunko. If a romantic comedy between her and the university student living next door piques your interest, please give it a try.

Also, an announcement! Believe it or not, “You Like Me, Don’t You?” is getting a manga adaptation! I was a bit worried about how things would turn out,

seeing as the first volume was released during rather troubling times, but there have been enough sales to guarantee a second print, in addition a continuation and even a manga. This is all because of you, the readers. Thank you so much.

I'll announce more details regarding the adaptation on Twitter once I can provide them. I hope you're excited to hear about them.

Finally, I'll give out all my thanks to those involved in this volume.

First up, my editor, Mr. Nakamizo. Thank you for your help on this volume, and I really look forward to working more with you in the future. Next up, my illustrator, Azuri Hinata. Thank you for all of the amazing artwork and illustrations you've provided for me. I can practically picture Kasumi leaping out from the cover page and inviting me out on a date with her. I hope we can continue this working relationship of ours for some time from now onward. Lastly, I offer the greatest of all thanks to all the readers who purchased this book. If fate will have it, let us meet again in the third volume.

Kota Nozomi

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